Title
By Any Means Necessary: The Art of Carrie Mae Weems, 1978-1991

Author
Searcy, Elizabeth Holland

Publication Date
2018

Peer reviewed|Thesis/dissertation

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

Los Angeles

By Any Means Necessary:
The Art of Carrie Mae Weems,
1978-1991

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy

in Art History

by

Elizabeth Holland Searcy

2018

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

By Any Means Necessary:

The Art of Carrie Mae Weems,

1978-1991

by

Elizabeth Holland Searcy

Doctor of Philosophy in Art History

University of California, Los Angeles, 2018

Professor Steven D. Nelson, Chair

This dissertation examines the photography of Carrie Mae Weems (born 1953) and her exploration issues of power within race, class, and gender. It focuses on the period of 1978-1991, from her first major series, *Family Pictures and Stories* (1978-1984), to *And 22 Million Very Tired and Very Angry People* (1991). In these early years of her career, Weems explores junctures of identity while levying a critique of American culture and its structures of dominance and marginalization. In the wake of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s and Second Wave Feminism of the 1970s, scholars—particularly women of color—began looking seriously at the intersectional nature of identity and how it manifests in culture and lived experience. These issues are the central themes Weems's career, and by looking at her early explorations this study provides critical context for her body of work.

Chapter One examines Weems's first major series, *Family Pictures and Stories* (1978-1984). In this work, Weems uses autobiography as ethnography along with American and photographic history to question the cultural invisibility of black people. In her manipulation of personal images and history, Weems questions the process of representation, its consequences, and the constructed nature of power. Chapter Two juxtaposes her late-1980s series *Ain't Jokin'* (1987-88) and *Colored People* (1989-90) to explore the black tradition of signifyin' found throughout literature and art, a framework that shows how art and culture create layers of meaning. When Weems signifies in these two series, she plays with literal and metaphorical meanings of jokes and mental associations about or applied to black people. The final chapter evaluates the role of vernacular culture in three bodies of work, namely *American Icons* (1988-89), *Then What? Photographs and Folklore* (1990), and *And 22 Million Very Tired and Very Angry People* (1991). Each of these works use folklore—including oral traditions and utilitarian objects—to connect the dots between culture, race, and power. By transforming these objects into tools of political activism, Weems positions her work within a larger radical tradition.

The dissertation of Elizabeth Holland Searcy is approved.

Miwon Kwon

Mary Nooter Roberts

Dell Upton

Steven D. Nelson, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2018

Contents

LIST OF FIGURES

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I'd like to extend my heartfelt thanks to those friends, family, colleagues, and advisors whose generosity have made this project possible.

I am especially thankful to the intellectual insights of my dissertation committee who include Miwon Kwon, Polly Roberts, and Dell Upton. Their advice and comments have proven vital to the realization of this project and helped me shape it into its ultimate form. In particular, I'd like to recognize my advisor and committee chair, Steven Nelson. His ongoing support and intellectual curiosity have been formative in my scholarship and outlook as an art historian. He has helped me navigate this project from its inception, pushing and encouraging me when I needed it. For that I am eternally grateful. I am also deeply thankful to the professors and mentors from my time in Washington, D. C., including Anne Collins Goodyear, Jessica Levin Martinez, and Bibi Obler.

UCLA has been a wonderful home for me intellectually, and that is due in no small part to the community of graduate students here. I am deeply grateful for the good fortune of having entered the program with an amazing cohort: Mya Chau, Yve Chavez, Cami Garland, Mark Pawlowski, Zach Rottman, Lakshika Senarath Gamage, and Lauren Taylor. Over many conversations they have helped me flesh out my thoughts on not only this project, but also what it means to be an art historian today. My time in Los Angeles has also been enriched by the dialogue and friendships of Alessandra Amin, Meg Bernstein, Dwight Carey, Aparna Kumar, and Elaine Sullivan.

Researching and writing about Carrie Mae Weems's work has been challenging and invigorating. I am thankful for her generosity of time, willingness to talk about her work, and answer my questions.

My parents' support was foundational for my pursuit of graduate school and the completion of this dissertation. My mom has a sense of adventure and willingness to learn that I deeply admire and hope to emulate. My father—who used every opportunity to introduce me to all kinds of art—has always encouraged my interest in the art history and made room for rigorous academic debate. My stepmother Mary has been the first one to recognize that this is hard and worthy work.

Finally, but most importantly, I could not have completed this dissertation without the support of my husband, Daniel. He has enthusiastically read draft after draft, provided immensely helpful commentary, pushed me when I needed a boost, and reminded me of why art matters. His steady and diligent work at his own writing and scholarship are a model for me. It is due to his support and encouragement that this project has come to fruition. I only hope that I could learn to see a fraction of the beauty in this world that he does.

VITA

2005	B.A., Visual Arts University of Chicago
2012	M.A., Art History The George Washington University
2012	*Leite Prize, Outstanding Second Year M.A. Student* Fine Art & Art History Department The George Washington University
2012	*Cosmos Scholar* The Cosmos Club Foundation
2012-13	*Edward A. Dickson History of Art Fellowship* Department of Art History University of California, Los Angeles
2014-15	*Graduate Student Research Mentorship Fellowship* Graduate Division University of California, Los Angeles
2015-17	*Edward A. Dickson History of Art Fellowship* Department of Art History University of California, Los Angeles
2016-17	UCHRI Graduate Student Dissertation Grant University of California Humanities Research Institute
2017-18	Teaching Assistant Consultant Department of Art History University of California, Los Angeles

PRESENTATIONS AND LECTURES

Searcy, Elizabeth Holland. 2011. "Sickness and Selfhood: Hannah Wilke's Intra-Venus." Paper presented at "Mardi Gras Conference," Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge, Louisiana, and "Matters of Life and Death: Decay and Rebirth in the Visual Domain", the 37th Annual Cleveland Symposium, Case Western Reserve University, Cleveland, Ohio.

———. 2011. “Campaign for Victory: Trauma and Desegregation in Jacob Lawrence’s War Series.” Paper presented at “The Ninth Annual Graduate Student Art History Symposium,” American University & George Washington University, Washington, D. C.

———. 2016. “Carrie Mae Weems’s Homecraft: Controlling Images and African American Families.” Lecture presented at Middlebury College, Middlebury, Vermont.

Introduction

On a long bus ride between San Francisco and San Diego, photographer Carrie Mae Weems was transformed by the writing of Zora Neale Hurston. While visiting friends in Northern California, she spotted a copy of the novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) on a friend's desk. Curious—in part because a different friend had recently mentioned that Weems reminded her of the author—she asked to borrow it for her trip back south, where she was enrolled in the Masters of Fine Art program at the University of California, San Diego (UCSD). The novel opened Weems's mind to new models of making art and exploring the world. The artist explains, "The first line had me, the first sentence. Once she got off the bus, Carrie Mae Weems was a changed girl."[1] This encounter with Hurston's text on a long bus ride not only altered Weems personally, but it shifted the perspective and form of her artwork as well.

Hurston's novel tells the story of the self-discovery and empowerment of a young black, Southern woman. The author, an ethnographer who studied under Franz Boas at Columbia University, uses colloquial language and dialect to tell the story from the woman's perspective.[2] The story and language of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

[1] Kathryn E. Delmez, ed., *Carrie Mae Weems: Three Decades of Photography and Video* (New Haven and London: Frist Center for the Visual Arts in association with Yale University Press, 2012), 260, note 12. Quoted from a conversation with Kathleen Delmez, July 8, 2011. This event—the exact date is not recorded or recalled—happened sometime between 1982-1984, while she was enrolled in UCSD's MFA program.

[2] The initial reception by black male authors of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* was very poor. But Weems was in line with the work's reclamation by feminist scholars of the 1970s and 1980s, something I explore more in Chapter One.

pushed Weems to study the connections between vernacular culture and art. The artist read the rest of the author's works in quick succession. Through her exploration of Hurston's writing, Weems realized folklore's power to plainly articulate social theories and cultural truths that are less clear in the dense theoretical texts she encountered in her education and leftist political work.[3] Hurston's work as an ethnographer inspired Weems to enroll in University of California, Berkeley's Graduate Program in Folklore after completing her M.F.A., and it motivated her to begin pairing her photographs with text.

Hurston's writings are a consistent touchstone for Weems. The author's influence on Weems appears in works from her M.F.A. thesis, *Family Pictures and Stories* (1978-1984) to her *Eatonville Portfolio* (2003) collaboration with Dawoud Bey, Deborah Willis, and Lonnie Graham, which explores the author's hometown in a series of four photographs. Before this encounter with Hurston, Weems mostly worked in a standard documentary mode. Her earliest series, *Environmental Portraits* (1977-1980), *Boardwalk, Santa Monica* (1980-1982), and *S. E. San Diego* (1983-1985), followed methods of photographers like Garry Winogrand and Robert Frank [Fig. I.1]. After her introduction to Hurston's texts, however, Weems began to incorporate elements of folklore to expand the political and critical aspects of her work.[4]

---

[3] Kathryn E. Delmez, "'Real Facts, by Real People:' Folklore in the Early Works of Carrie Mae Weems," in *Carrie Mae Weems: Three Decades of Photography and Video*, ed. Kathryn E. Delmez (New Haven and London: Frist Center for the Visual Arts in association with Yale University Press, 2012), 13.

[4] Throughout this text (particularly in Chapter Three), I use the terms "folklore" or "vernacular culture." These are contested terms with some scholars casting them aside in recent years. Those who reject the terms rightly point to their imbalanced application toward marginalized groups and use to distinguish unofficial or regional art from the canon of so-called Fine Art. However, I use them in the broader sense to discuss the objects, beliefs, and traditions of a culture. I find these terms useful to discuss the

This project looks at a selection of Weems's work from the late 1970s to the early 1990s. While not constructed chronologically, this text explores the period that leads up to and immediately surrounds the artist's iconic *Kitchen Table Series* (1990). Our starting point is *Family Pictures and Stories*, the artist's first major series and also the first to put into practice the things that she learned from Hurston. The journey continues by looking at her 1980s series, *Ain't Jokin'* (1987), *American Icons* (1988-1989), and *Colored People* (1989-1990), and *Then What? Photographs and Folklore* (1990) and *And 22 Million Very Tired and Very Angry People* (1991). In each chapter, I examine how Weems uses her photographic work to offer a critique of race in American culture and the power structures that shape it.

Early Life

Weems was born in Portland, Oregon on April 20, 1953, and grew up surrounded by her siblings and parents and their large extended family, background which became fodder for *Family Pictures and Stories*. This series weaves the experiences of her family—like her grandfather's mixed-race heritage, the hardships of working the land in the South, and their move to the North—together with stories of Harriet Tubman, fantastical tall tales, and photographs.

Weems's extended family, starting with her mother's aunt, had migrated to the Pacific Northwest from the Mississippi Delta region in the early twentieth century,

---

traditional sources that Weems turns to throughout her career, particularly because "folklore" is a term the artist embraces herself. Folklore—with the wealth of its traditions, stories, knowledge, and objects—is what distinguishes one cultural group from another. It is a means of marking us/them or insiders/outsiders. By embracing and utilizing African American folklore and vernacular culture, Weems is using a distinctly black perspective for her art.

participating in the pattern of movement of African Americans from the South to the North known as the Great Migration. Weems's mother, also named Carrie, and her father, Myrlie, met in Mississippi while sharecropping on a plantation. They moved to Portland while she was pregnant with the artist's older sister Alice.[5] There, Myrlie worked in a tannery, and Carrie worked in a textile factory and also ran a barbeque restaurant.[6]

In 1970, when Weems was seventeen-years-old, she moved to San Francisco with a friend. Once there, they were invited to join Anna Halprin's dance company, San Francisco Dancers' Workshop [Fig. I.2]. The group used experimental choreography to explore political ideas.[7] Weems describes the company and Halprin as being "interested in ideas about peace and using dance as a way to bridge different cultures together as a vehicle for multicultural expression."[8] Ultimately, after a year or two with the Workshop, she decided that dance was not the vehicle for her own personal expression.

While she was in San Francisco, Weems began to work as a political activist in grassroots, Marxist organizations.[9] As a child of agricultural and industrial laborers she

---

[5] Carrie Mae Weems, "Family Pictures and Stories: A Photographic Installation" (University of California San Diego, 1984), 3–4.
[6] Weems, 3; Michael J. Agovino, "Artist Carrie Mae Weems Talks Race, Gender, and Finally Getting the Recognition She Deserves," ELLE, November 20, 2013, http://www.elle.com/pop-culture/best/carrie-mae-weems-profile.

[7] Or, as the artist explained to Michael J. Agovino in 2013, "It was really avant-garde work. We were taking our clothes off constantly." Agovino, "Artist Carrie Mae Weems Talks Race, Gender, and Finally Getting the Recognition She Deserves."

[8] "Carrie Mae Weems: Dance, Bodies, and Aging | ART21," accessed March 14, 2016, http://www.art21.org/texts/carrie-mae-weems/interview-carrie-mae-weems-dance-bodies-and-aging.

[9] Delmez, "'Real Facts, by Real People:' Folklore in the Early Works of Carrie Mae Weems," 13; Andrea Kirsch, "Carrie Mae Weems: Issues in Black, White and Color," in

was deeply concerned with the rights of the working class. The artist continued her work as a community organizer for the next decade as she expanded her artistic education. Indeed, her experience as a dancer with the San Francisco Dancers' Workshop and organizer served as an entrée into her later work.

When a friend gave her a camera as a birthday present in the early 1970s, Weems felt that she had found her means of artistic expression.[10] She told Kristin Braswell at *Ebony* that she took to the camera and photography "like a fish to water" and that she knew that she was not going to be a dancer or painter, but a photographer. She continues, "Photography has this amazing ability to describe things in a way that I might be at a lost [*sic*] of words for; there are some things we cannot point to, but a photo can. There was something about the descriptive power of photography that I fell in love with. It made sense to me."[11] Weems saw the camera as a tool that could merge her interests in leftist political action and the arts.

Throughout the 1970s Weems pursued photography while also working a series of jobs in offices, restaurants, factories, and farms, and as a community organizer.[12] She

---

Carrie Mae Weems (Washington, D.C.: National Museum of Women in the Arts, 1994), 9; "Timeline," http://carriemaeweems.net/index.html.

[10] There are different accounts for when she received her first camera. Many popular media reports say that was a gift for her twentieth birthday (see Sheets and Agovino). In exhibition catalogues, the dates differ as well. Kathleen Delmez describes it as a gift for her twenty-first birthday (Delmez, "Introduction," 1), while Andrea Kirsch records the year as 1976 (Kirsch 9). Weems herself has variously claimed that it was around 1971, 1972, 1973, or 1974 (see "Dance, Bodies, and Aging," *Art21*; Braswell; and Bey 2009).

[11] Kristin Braswell, "Artist Carrie Mae Weems on 30 Years of Genius," *Ebony*, February 5, 2014, http://www.ebony.com/entertainment-culture/artist-carrie-mae-weems-on-30-years-of-genius-999.

[12] Kirsch, "Carrie Mae Weems: Issues in Black, White and Color," 9.

lived bicoastally, moving back and forth between San Francisco and New York City, and took photography classes at both San Francisco City College and The Studio Museum in Harlem.[13] At the latter, she took a class taught by Dawoud Bey and began interacting with people like Anthony Barboza (for whom she was a studio assistant), Shawn Walker, Ming Smith, Beuford Smith, and other members of the Kamoinge Workshop, a collective of black photographers originally organized by Roy DeCarava and active from the 1960s through the present.[14] These connections showed her possible pathways for herself as an artist and a photographic subject. More than that, as she explains in a conversation with Bey, "I also learned to *create* a path; finding my own nuanced voice on the road toward self-definition, as well as defining/describing a people and our historical moment."[15]

Resuming her education, Weems enrolled as an undergraduate at California Institute of the Arts (CalArts) and received her B.F.A. in 1981. Encouraged by faculty member Ulysses Jenkins, she enrolled in the graduate program at UCSD. There supportive faculty members encouraged the artist to push her work in new directions. Professor and performance and conceptual artist Eleanor Antin recalls telling Weems, "Your photographs are beautiful, …but why don't you do something different with the camera. Do something that no one has ever done before!"[16] Weems also recalled being

---

[13] Dawoud Bey, "Carrie Mae Weems," *Bomb* 108 (Summer 2009), http://bombsite.com/issues/108/articles/3307; "Timeline."
[14] Bey, "Carrie Mae Weems."

[15] Bey, italics in the original.

[16] As quoted by Will Bowen, "A Woman's Point of View: UC San Diego Art Exhibit Has Work by 7 Trailblazing Female Artists in La Jolla," lajollalight.com, accessed March 3, 2018, http://www.lajollalight.com/art/sd-cm-ljl-seven-artists-20180131-story.html.

challenged by Fred Londier, who chaired her thesis committee, to address a series of questions that were becoming crucial for documentary photography in the late 1970s and early 1980s: Who is doing the looking? What role do the subjects have in the creation and reception of the image? Who is the audience?[17] Spurred on by these inquiries, Weems began experimenting with her photography and moved away from her street photography in her earlier series and towards a more conceptual mode with *Family Pictures and Stories*.

After completing her M.F.A. at UCSD, Weems enrolled in the Master's program in Folklore at Berkeley. At first, she considered her academic work there to be separate from her artistic pursuits. However, encouragement from faculty members such as Alan Dundes and Barbara Christian helped her realize that they could be united.[18] This awareness directly informed her next two series, *Ain't Jokin'* and *American Icons*, and continued to be foundational for her work from then on.

The 1980s

The series under consideration here were made, for the most part, in the 1980s, and the political and cultural events of the decade are important for our understanding of the work. The decade was marked by the Reagan administration, conservative attacks on the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), and the AIDS crisis. These political and cultural events provide context for Weems's work from this period.

[17] Kirsch, "Carrie Mae Weems: Issues in Black, White and Color," 9.
[18] Delmez, "'Real Facts, by Real People:' Folklore in the Early Works of Carrie Mae Weems," 13–14; Kirsch, "Carrie Mae Weems: Issues in Black, White and Color," 13.

Politics

Politically, Ronald Reagan dominated American policy in the 1980s. First elected in 1980 and reelected in 1984, his presidency ran the length of the decade. Even before the 1980 campaign, however, Reagan shaped the discourse on race, class, and gender in the United States. In his failed 1976 presidential bid, welfare fraud dominated his policy discussions. Reagan's attack on welfare centered on abuse by single women deemed by the media as "welfare queens."[19] During the New Hampshire primary, Reagan referred to a Chicago woman, Linda Taylor (although not by name), who the Illinois state had charged with welfare fraud. Taylor's case was truly bizarre: not only was she accused of defrauding the government of hundreds of thousands of dollars with dozens of aliases (of different races and ages), but she was also charged with robbery, bigamy, kidnapping, and insurance fraud.[20] From this single, atypical example, Reagan—and the media—concluded that fraud was endemic to the welfare program. At nearly every stop, the candidate spoke of Taylor's "80 names, 30 addresses, 12 Social Security cards and… veterans benefits [from] four nonexisting deceased husbands," and usually added, "Her tax-free cash income alone is over $150,000."[21] Taylor's extreme case helped shape the image of welfare recipients into the cultural myth of the welfare queen, a stereotype that has specific connotations of race, class, and gender and particularly harms black women.

---

[19] Julilly Kohler-Hausmann, "'The Crime of Survival': Fraud Prosecutions, Community Surveillance, and the Original 'Welfare Queen,'" *Journal of Social History* 41, no. 2 (2007): 334.

[20] Kohler-Hausmann, 334.

[21] "'Welfare Queen' Becomes Issue in Reagan Campaign," *New York Times*, February 15 1976.

In her photographic series from the 1980s, Weems explores the impact of racialized, gendered, and class-based stereotypes like the welfare queen. In particular, the artist investigates the extrapolation of these ideas to a larger population, something that Jane Fritch at the *Chicago Tribune* noted in October of 1978 when she said, "Once the focus of national outrage, the flamboyant and mysterious Chicago woman has relinquished her throne to hundreds of others who have developed equally outrageous schemes to bilk the welfare system of millions of dollars."[22] Over time, the memory of Taylor's (alleged) fraud dissipated, yet the stereotype of poor black women as welfare queens continued.

In the politics of the 1980s, diversity and inequality were inconsistently upheld at best. In 1982 the proposed Equal Rights Amendment (ERA), which would constitutionally guarantee equal rights regardless of gender, expired three states shy of ratification; yet, in 1986, we celebrated the first official Martin Luther King, Jr. Day as a federal holiday. One figure who shaped his public advocacy around these issues of multiculturalism and diversity was the activist, minister, and politician Jesse Jackson. As a reaction against Reagan and his economic and social policies, Jackson launched a presidential campaign in 1984. He organized the National Rainbow Coalition, a group intended to band together all races against the policies that privileged those who already held power.[23] In a stump speech recorded by the *New York Times* in February of 1984 he declared,

---

[22] Jane Fritch, "Welfare Queen Becomes Case Study," *Chicago Tribune*, October 29, 1978, 2.

[23] See Ronald Smothers, "Jesse Jackson Seeks Wider Audience," *The New York Times*, October 17, 1983, http://www.nytimes.com/1983/10/17/us/jesse-jackson-seeks-wider-

> America is not a blanket of one piece of unbroken cloth, one color, one texture. America is a quilt of many patches, many pieces, many colors, various textures. But everybody fits somewhere. That's what makes America great. Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses; In this nation we will make room for you…. The rainbow coalition is winning. When I see young Americans standing up, we're winning. Last time around, Reagan won by default. It was our fault; We did not register and vote as we should have voted. We were not aware of the dangers.[24]

The political climate of the 1980s led to a half-hearted embrace of multiculturalism. On the one hand, there was increased visibility for people of color in popular media; on the other, there were the policies that concentrated (particularly economic) advantage in the hands of those who already benefitted from privilege. Weems's work from this period sought to reveal the ways that power influenced American society.

Culture Wars

While the political landscape was dominated by Reagan's presidency, the culture wars raged during the 1980s, coming to a peak in 1989 when American art and politics collided in a scandal centered on public funding for artists who produce work that certain members of congress and conservative organizations found offensive. North Carolina Senator Jesse Helms crusaded fervently to remove funding from these types of art objects, singling out the photographs of Robert Mapplethorpe and Andres Serrano as particularly obscene: the former for his highly aestheticized, homoerotic photographs of black men from *The Black Book* (1986) and the latter for his photograph *Piss Christ* (1987, Fig. I.3) that showed a crucifix immersed in the artist's urine.

---

audience.html; and E. R. Shipp, "Jackson to Put Energies into Political Coalition," *The New York Times*, November 10, 1984.

[24] "The Speech: Jesse Jackson; 'You Can Make a Difference,'" *The New York Times*, February 27, 1984.

The origins of the scandal can be traced back to the American Family Association (AFA), a Tupelo, Mississippi, organization with virulent anti-gay beliefs who frequently circulate mailers and videos suggesting that people boycott certain brands or organizations for their support for what they call the homosexual agenda.[25] In the spring of 1989, the AFA sent out one million letters railing against *Piss Christ*, causing people to investigate the National Endowment for the Arts grants for other alleged infractions against decency and Texas Representative Dick Armey to begin circulating flyers in Congress.[26] In mid-July, the House of Representatives and the Senate confirmed an amendment that would cut the budget of the National Endowment for the Arts for 1990 by $45,000, the amount that had been awarded for Serrano and Mapplethorpe. It was intended to send a message that the politicians (and presumably the people they represent) did not approve of the grants without cutting the budget drastically.[27]

Responding to the scandal, Carol Vance wrote an essay for *Art in America* that argued that the assault on art waged by conservative politicians and organizations should be viewed as a political move "to restore traditional social arrangements and

---

[25] See Richard Meyer, "The Jesse Helms Theory of Art," *October* 104(2003): 135, n. 11; and The Southern Poverty Law Center, "American Family Association," http://www.splcenter.org/get-informed/intelligence-files/groups/american-family-association#.UY7bjyt4Yw4. The AFA has been listed by the SPLC as a hate group since 2010.

[26] Carol S. Vance, "The War on Culture," in *Art Matters: How the Culture Wars Changed America*, ed. Brian Wallis, Marianne Weems, and Philip Yenawine (New York and London: New York University Press, 1999), 223.

[27] Robin Toner, "House Sends Art Endowment Message on Taxpayers' Taste," *New York Times*, July 13, 1989. Contrast this with the renewed debates on NEA funding in the Trump presidency where the organization is under constant threat of losing all funding (even without a scandal centered on particular objects it had funded).

reduce diversity."[28] She argued that the Right fully understood that "the arena of representation is a real ground for [political] struggle" and therefore it is all the more important that art not be subjected to censorship.[29]

Art

The art world responded to the assault on art funding not only with critical writing from people like Vance, but also with exhibitions that interrogated the political climate, most notably in "The Decade Show: Frameworks of Identity in the 1980s." Collaboratively organized by the Museum of Contemporary Hispanic Art, the New Museum, and the Studio Museum in Harlem in 1990, "The Decade Show" explored the intersection of art and identity in the 1980s. Rather than being focused on a specific media, discipline, or style, the exhibition was organized around political issues. The show deliberately sought to include artists who were frequently overlooked by the mainstream museum world.

Sharon Patton, writing from the perspective of The Studio Museum in Harlem, articulated the curatorial endeavor of the show as follows:

> The institutional agendas were clear: first, to present in a national arena African American artists; and second, to affirm cultural pluralism within the theater of the art world. This exhibition is a response, albeit not unique nor the first, to the exclusion of many African American artists from the critical art literature, art history, and exhibitions on American art.[30]

---

[28] Carol S. Vance, "The War on Culture," *Art in America* 77, no. 9 (September 1989): 43.

[29] Vance, 43.

[30] Sharon F. Patton, "The Agenda in the Eighties: Socially Conscious Art," in *The Decade Show: Frameworks of Identity in the 1980s* (New York: Museum of Contemporary Hispanic Art, The New Museum of Contemporary Art, The Studio Museum in Harlem, 1990), 77.

She continues, "But THE DECADE SHOW is more than an art historical redress; it is an exhibition about artists who were concerned about the condition of society and culture in the 1980s."[31] This focus on issues of identity and politics led to the inclusion of work by people like Barbara Kruger, David Hammons, David Wojnarovicz, Ana Mendiata, Pat Ward Williams, and Lorna Simpson.

The work that most directly confronted the culture wars was *Relax Senator Helms, The Art World is Your Kind of Place!* (1989, Fig. I.4) by the anonymous feminist collective Guerilla Girls. Organized in the mid-1980s, the Guerilla Girls are a group of women artists who work collectively to fight inequality in the art world, all while protecting their identities by wearing gorilla masks and all black in public and using pseudonyms taken from famous dead women such as Kathë Kollowitz, Frida Kahlo, and Gertrude Stein. The Guerilla Girls appropriate commercial visual language in their artwork. *Relax Senator Helms* is a text-laden poster with no imagery, just bullet points that explain the commonalities between the conservative senator who spearheaded the attack on the NEA and the art world. Among other facts, it tells us that "the number of blacks at an art gallery opening is about the same as at one of [Helms's] garden parties," "women artists have their place: after all, they earn less than 1/3 of what male artists earn," and "the sexual imagery in most respected works of art is the expression of wholesome heterosexual males." While Weems was not included in "The Decade Show," her work is similarly concerned with identity and power and representation.

Exhibitions like "The Decade Show" pointed toward an emerging generation of artists, including Weems, who were concerned with new frameworks and ideas. In his

[31] Patton, 77.

essays "Pictures" (1977 and 1979) and "The Photographic Activity of Postmodernism" (1980), Douglas Crimp articulated these new frameworks in their relationship to earlier modes of art-making. He argues, "Postmodernism is about art's dispersal, its plurality, by which I certainly do not mean pluralism."[32] Pluralism, as Crimp defines it, corresponds to the cult of originality found in modernism. The postmodern plurality that he points to is that of the copy. Postmodernism—which includes appropriation, fragmentation, decentralization, and the break down between "high" and "low" culture—became a central principle of art in the 1980s, shaped by Crimp's texts and those concerned with the death of authorship by theorists Michel Foucault and Roland Barthes.[33]

Crimp first used the term postmodernism to describe the collective concerns of the artists shown in an exhibition, "Pictures," which he organized in 1977 at Artists Space in New York. These artists—Troy Brauntuch, Jack Goldstein, Sherrie Levine, Robert Longo, and Philip Smith—would be grouped together by critics with contemporaries like Dara Birnbaum, Louise Lawler, Barbara Kruger, Cindy Sherman, and Laurie Simmons by critics and called The Pictures Generation. While Weems is not typically included in the moniker, her concerns and those of these artists overlap in their explorations of popular culture and archetypal imagery. In fact, Weems, Kruger, Lawler,

[32] Douglas Crimp, "The Photographic Activity of Postmodernism," *October* 15 (1980): 91. See also Douglas Crimp, "Pictures," *October* 8 (1979): 75–88.
[33] Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," in *Image Music Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 142–48; Michel Foucault, "What Is An Author?," in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 101–20.

and Prince collaborated with the artist collective Group Material in their booklet *Inserts* (1988) distributed as a supplement to the *New York Times*.[34]

Weems's work from this time period acts as a connecting thread between mainstream artists like those in Group Material and the art promoting racial uplift from the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s and 1970s. Promoted by writers such as Amiri Baraka (known during this period as LeRoi Jones), Larry Neal, and James T. Stewart, the Black Arts Movement rejects what they view as a white paradigm of culture in favor of a specifically black one. Stewart writes, "This is necessary because existing white paradigms or models do not correspond to the realities of black existence…. Our models must be consistent with a black style, our natural aesthetic styles, and our moral and spiritual styles."[35] The Black Arts Movement corresponds to the Black Power movement. Or, as Neal explains, "Both concepts are nationalistic. One is concerned with the relationship between art and politics; the other with the art of politics."[36] Given its political motivation, many artworks from Black Arts Movement were made for contexts outside of the museum. The collective Africobra, for instance, frequently made public murals or screen prints and posters.

Black photographers aligned with the Black Arts Movement were also deeply concerned with the public circulation and reception of their work. *The Black*

---

[34] Julie Ault, ed., *Show and Tell: A Chronicle of Group Material* (London: Four Corners Books, 2010), 133. I touch on this collaboration in Chapter Two.
[35] James T. Stewart, "The Development of the Black Revolutionary Artist," in *Black Fire: An Anthology of Afro-American Writing*, ed. LeRoi Jones and Larry Neal (New York: Morrow, 1968), 3.

[36] Larry Neal, "The Black Arts Movement," *The Drama Review* 12, no. 4 (Summer 1968): 29.

Photographers Annual was a short-lived journal that published four volumes from 1973 to 1980. Edited by Joe Crawford, Joe Walker, and members of the Kamoinge Workshop, it was intended to be a space for black photographers to publish and share their work with each other and the world since, at the time, there were few outlets for them to do so and the commercial market was practically nonexistent.[37] Just as Stewart stated that it was necessary to create a new paradigm to correct the white one, *The Black Photographers Annual* desired to create a new model for black photography to correct for the one that already existed in the world.[38]

Weems often notes the importance of the *Black Photographers Annual* in her discovery of photography. For Weems, this was one of the first moments she saw and considered images made by and of African Americans.[39] While the photographers in the volumes include both those who are prominent and those who have been forgotten over the course of time, the texts were written by well-known authors—such as Toni Morrison and James Baldwin, and artists, such as Gordon Parks—and provided political grounding and additional context for the images.

Weems, along with a generation of artists and art critics who grew up during the Civil Rights Era—such as Lorna Simpson, Glenn Ligon, and Kellie Jones—rose to prominence in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Trey Ellis, writing in 1989, proposed that this new generation of black people initiated a New Black Aesthetic. He argues that he

---

[37] "A Salute to Black Photographers," Ebony, April 1973, 73.
[38] James T. Stewart, "The Development of the Black Revolutionary Artist," in Black Fire: An Anthology of Afro-American Writing, ed. LeRoi Jones and Larry Neal (New York: Morrow, 1968), 3.

[39] Bey, “Carrie Mae Weems.”

and other members of this generation are "cultural mulattos," easily moving between black and white culture.[40] Like all young people, the members of the New Black Aesthetic were indelibly shaped by and also sought to distinguish themselves from their parents. As such, even though they rebelled against some of their parents' Black Arts Movement values, the younger generation still produced art that is motivated by culture, nationalism, and inequality.[41]

Methods and Theoretical Concerns

Shortly after I started this project in 2012-2013, it seemed like Weems was suddenly everywhere: she was a 2013 MacArthur Fellow and had a major retrospective touring the nation. Despite these accolades, I was surprised to find that no one had devoted a monographic academic study to her work. My initial research involved sorting through the quickly-accumulating popular accounts to find the narratives that were missing. I benefitted early on from a trip to Nashville, Tennessee to visit the Frist Center for the Visual Arts and Kathleen Delmez who had curated the retrospective. Diving into their archive of Weems's material provided a jump start to my own explorations of her art.

My engagement with Weems's work has been informed by the work of black feminist scholars who articulate the intersections of race, class, and gender. In the decades that followed Weems's work under consideration here, growing attention has been paid to how facets of identity interact and come together as something new, much

[40] Trey Ellis, "The New Black Aesthetic," *Callaloo*, no. 38 (Winter 1989): 235.

[41] Ellis, 239.

like single plies spun together to form a strand of yarn. Writers like Michele Wallace and Patricia Hill Collins have modeled what has come to be called intersectional feminism. Indicative of both the time period and content of Weems's early work, intersectional feminism argues that one cannot understand these three cultural identities separately.

Collins's book *Black Feminist Thought* (1991) investigates the overlapping patterns of subjugation for black women. It suggests that there are three types of oppression endured by African American women: political, economic, and ideological. While the first two concern relegation to low-paying jobs or lack of representation in government, ideological oppression is more about justification.[42] Controlling images, Collins argues, oppress by defining and regulating what it means to be a black woman.[43] For instance, her five examples of controlling images—mammies, matriarchs, welfare mothers, black ladies, and jezebels—are each expected to move through the world in a certain way. Additionally, they are the models to which real black women are held. Collins argues that these controlling images are used to justify the political and economic oppression of black women by encoding their stereotypes into all aspects of society, including politics, advertising, literature, and music. While other forms of oppression restrict their class status and political power through low-paying jobs and lack of governmental representation, ideological oppression makes all of this seem natural.

Collins's explication of controlling images and their role in ideological oppression provides a theoretical framework for my engagement with Weems's work. In particular,

---

[42] Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York and London: Routledge, 2000), 6–7.

[43] Collins, 77.

I use it to illuminate how the artist complicates and undercuts the restrictive and pathologizing tendencies of stereotypes. This is most apparent in my discussion of *Family Pictures and Stories*, where Weems works against controlling images with her explorations of family history and myth.

When it was published in 1979, Wallace's *Black Macho and the Myth of Superwoman* caused a stir of controversy. Published as a book early in the year, it debuted as the cover story of the January 1979 *Ms. Magazine*. Outraged by Wallace's critique of the sexism of the black power movement in the 1960s and 1970s, sociologist Robert Staples wrote a searing critique in the March/April issue of *The Black Scholar*.[44] His essay in turn also spawned a backlash, and the journal devoted the following May/June issue to "The Black Sexism Debate" with responses from people like Audre Lorde, June Jordan, and Ntozake Shange (along with another response by Staples).[45] The controversy was big enough that not only was the book widely reviewed, but Walker also appeared on Phil Donahue's nationally syndicated talk show.

Much of the debate centered on Wallace's refusal to have separate discussions of racism and sexism. Indeed, she argues that they cannot be truly separated, as she explains in her preface to the 1990 reprint of the now-classic text:

> Not only do I see "invisibility" as a problem of ideology; I also see it as the final, and most difficult to combat, stage of racism. The fact that it involves conjunctions not only of racism and sexism but also conjunctions of capitalist exploitation and compulsory heterosexuality makes it even more difficult to

[44] Robert Staples, "The Myth of Black Macho: A Response to Angry Black Feminists," *The Black Scholar* 10, no. 6/7 (March/April 1979): 24–33.

[45] See *The Black Scholar* Vol. 10, no. 8/9 (May/June 1979).

> diagnose. I suspect that such conjunctions cannot be resolved at all. Rather they must be unpacked, examined and disarmed.[46]

Wallace's writing struck an immediate chord and continued to shape the discussion of intersectional feminism. Indeed, Wallace's articulation of the particular constraints felt by black women foreshadow Collins's investigation of controlling images in *Black Feminist Thought*.

The connections that Wallace makes between race, class, and gender had a deep impact on Weems's work. The photographer attended a lecture delivered by Wallace at The Studio Museum in Harlem around the time of *Black Macho's* publication. She recalls it as packed with people and sparking debate for weeks after.[47]

Along with intersectional feminism, postmodernist theory rose to prominence in the 1980s. Critics and scholars—including Hal Foster, Fredric Jameson, and Charles Jencks—described a break with high modernist practices in the fields of art, architecture, literature, and more. One of the key features of postmodernism is an erosion of the distinction between so-called high culture and popular or mass culture.[48] Jameson argues that two significant elements to postmodernism are pastiche and schizophrenia. Pastiche is a parody without mocking and is not grounded by a standard of norms.[49] Postmodernism's schizophrenia (not diagnostic, but rather philosophic

---

[46] Michele Wallace, *Black Macho and The Myth of Superwoman*, Haymarket Series (New York and London: Verso, 1990), xix.
[47] Bey, "Carrie Mae Weems."

[48] Fredric Jameson, "Postmodernism and Consumer Society," in *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, ed. Hal Foster (New York: The New Press, 1998), 128, originally presented as a lecture at the Whitney Museum of Art, fall 1982.

[49] Jameson, 130–31.

explanation primarily based on the work of Jacques Lacan) emphasizes the disconnection and decentralization of cultural production: "art about other art, images of other images"[50]

In "The Discourse of Others," Craig Owens notes the meeting of feminist and postmodernist critique in the discussion of the ideological work of photographs. He argues, "It is precisely the legislative frontier between what can be represented and what cannot that the postmodernist operation is being staged—not in order to transcend representation, but in order to expose that system of power that authorizes certain representations while blocking, prohibiting, or invalidating others."[51] Weems's photographic series, installations, and other works considered here are made in this confluence of postmodernism and intersectional feminism. By using controlling images, she subverts the narratives that are promoted through them. This act of deconstruction becomes a way to understand society and the workings of its power structures.

In addition to the critical framework of intersectional feminism, I also look to black folklore and literary criticism. As Weems turned to the ethnographic writings of Hurston, I do as well. Folklore has been a sustained influence on Weems's art since *Family Pictures* and with even more intensity after her time at Berkeley. Hurston's writings, especially those on her hometown of Eatonville, Florida, became a model for Weems. For Weems, folklore became a way to cut through mainstream culture—or the white vernacular—and learn "real facts, by real people," instead of abstract theory.[52]

---

[50] Jameson, 137 and 141.
[51] Craig Owens, "The Discourse of Others: Feminists and Postmodernism," in *Beyond Recognition: Representation, Power, and Culture* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1994), 168.

[52] Kirsch, "Carrie Mae Weems: Issues in Black, White and Color," 13.

Chapter One explores Weems's first major series, *Family Pictures and Stories*. Here I investigate how she looks to the tactics of early African American photographic portraiture, family albums, and autobiography-as-ethnography to question the cultural invisibility of black Americans. In the first part of the chapter, I look at African American photographic practice of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, including the portraiture of Frederick Douglass and recent scholarship surrounding black family photo albums. Because of photography's long entanglement with notions of truth and reality, black Americans used photographic portraiture early in its history to undermine the persistent, racist images disseminated in popular culture. *Family Pictures* plays with the tension between the photograph as document and the photograph as an actively constructed object by blending the images with texts and audio full of history, myth, and stories. Following in the footsteps of Hurston and other contemporary black feminist writers like Wallace, Lorde, and Alice Walker, Weems uses her own story as a means of cultural and ethnographic exploration. By highlighting the constructed nature of photography, *Family Pictures* also underscores the constructed nature of power. In her manipulation of personal images and history, Weems questions the process of representation, its consequences, and our means of negotiating this space.

Chapter Two juxtaposes the late-1980s series *Ain't Jokin'* and *Colored People* to explore the African American tradition of signifyin' found throughout black literature and art. Artist and writer Coco Fusco explains how signifyin' works: "To signify is to rework received meanings; the difference between the literal and the metaphorical is thrust into the foreground by an approach that operates by implication, indirect

communication, imagistic rendering, rhythmic delivery, and parody."[53] When Weems signifies in these two series, she plays with literal and metaphorical meanings associated with jokes, mental associations, and labels applied to black people. *Ain't Jokin'* does this by bluntly translating racist question-and-answer jokes and tropes into photographs.

The final chapter evaluates political work in *American Icons*, *Then What? Photographs and Folklore*, and *And 22 Million Very Tired and Very Angry People*. I demonstrate how these artworks are vehicles of empowerment and connect the dots between culture, race, and power. Each of these works transform everyday objects into tools of political activism in a critique of American culture. Even more, they intervene against the consequences of power and explode the limits of tradition. *American Icons* elevates racist decorative figurines to the status of icons to reveal the role of racism in American culture; *Then What* probes the ways that folklore has been a means of resistance and survival for African Americans; and *22 Million* applies radical political theory to everyday objects to spur collective action against inequality. With these works, Weems positions her work as part of a larger radical tradition.

[53] Coco Fusco, "Wreaking Havoc on the Signified," *frieze*, May 1995, https://frieze.com/article/wreaking-havoc-signified.

1

(Black) Families, (Black) Stories

Standing in front of Carrie Mae Weems's *Family Pictures and Stories* at California African American Museum's 2017 installation of "We Wanted a Revolution," your attention drifts between photographs, texts, and audio playing from a speaker overhead.[1] Depending on what point you arrive in the approximately forty-five-minute recording, your perception of the work's message might change. If you arrive when Weems talks about Harriet Tubman or tells stories from her family working as sharecroppers in the Deep South, you might think about the systems of oppression faced by black families. If you arrive, instead, when the artist speaks about disagreements between herself and her siblings, you might find yourself searching for the visual evidence in the photographs or remembering your own familial conflicts. Even without the audio, you drift from image to image, focusing at first on the oversize snapshots in the center and move gradually around to the smaller frames paired with captions.

Family Pictures and Stories [Fig. 1.1], Weems's first major series, combines images, texts, and audio from her parents and siblings in a powerful portrait of a working-class African American family. While the images date from the late 1970s through the early 1980s, *Family Pictures and Stories* took its shape as her MFA thesis at the University of California, San Diego.[2] Attending the program from 1982 to 1984,

[1] "We Wanted a Revolution: Black Radical Women, 1965-1985" was organized by the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art at the Brooklyn Museum and curated by Catherine Morris and Rujeko Hockley.

[2] Her thesis committee included Fred Lonidier (chair), Robert Edelman, Helen Harrison, and Moira Roth. In her acknowledgements, she also thanks her "dear friend"

Weems made a collection of photographs, audio, and written text about her family in Portland, Oregon. *Family Pictures* gathers narratives from these diverse sources to form a collective portrait of the Weems family with the artist present both behind and in front of the camera.

With this series, she examines issues of blackness and invisibility, the power of telling your own story, and the consequences of who does the looking and who is being looked at. In her recollection of her family's history, Weems constructs and fabricates her own story. The act of telling her family's story becomes a way to define who they are and their place in American culture. She uses the multiple media of *Family Pictures*—its photographs and their captions and the audio—to underscore the remembered nature of this history. Each component relates memories from a family member, typically the artist or her parents. The written texts include simple captions, quotes from her family members, and stories that describe the people in the pictures. In the audio recording, we hear an interview with the artist's mother, the tall-tales of her father, and stories from American history. In the small catalogue accompanying her MFA show Weems states,

> At one time or another we all feel a profound need to know, and/or to create our own history, to define our families, our friends, ourselves in relationship to all other things, people, places, and events. And no doubt there is something grand in the knowing and the creating of ourselves, and something grander still about how we know and create our personal histories.... In my work, which incorporates photographs, narratives, autobiographical accounts and hearsay, that "something grand" has to do with making a number of connections in my own personal history that have to do with being poor, black, working class, and a woman to boot.[3]

Kerry Marshall—who went on to become an important artist in his own right—for helping with the installation. See Carrie Mae Weems, "Family Pictures and Stories: A Photographic Installation" (University of California San Diego, 1984).

[3] Weems, 1.

Thus, Weems declares from the beginning that the series fundamentally deals with defining herself and her history. But in this statement she acknowledges that the truth is not her aim—instead, Weems uses the fuzzy nature of memory as a launching point for her exploration of the Weems family.

This chapter explores how *Family Pictures and Stories* illuminates the relationship between power and representation and examines how blackness—and its discourse—works in and through pictures and stories. I will trace the scholarly and artistic approaches to autobiography, ethnography, and vernacular stories, and Weems's work in relation to them. Additionally, this text investigates how Weems flips the cultural expectations as both the author and subject, and in doing so, uses her own story as a force against cultural invisibility.

Invisibility and Blackness

> *I am an invisible man. No, I am not a spook like those who haunted Edgar Allan Poe; nor am I one of your Hollywood-movie ectoplasms. I am a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fiber and liquids—and I might even be said to possess a mind. I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me.* ~Ralph Ellison[4]

Family Pictures and Stories explores how American society interprets images with black bodies as contingent on their very blackness, while works with white bodies remain open to broader readings. As Ellison writes in the passage above, blackness often conveys invisibility. In these series, Weems pushes boundaries and investigates the idea that a black woman or black family can represent something beyond the fact of their

[4] Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (New York: Vintage Books, 1947), 3.

dark skin or their role of foil to the universalized experience of whiteness. In her 1995 conversation with bell hooks, the photographer says,

> These images of black men and black women should speak on many levels, calling to mind in the viewer a range of issues and concerns…. Well, you know, one of the things that I was thinking about was whether it might be possible to use black subjects to represent universal concerns. When we watch Hollywood movies, usually with white subjects, those images create a cultural terrain that we watch and walk on and move through. I wanted to create that same kind of experience using my subjects. Yet when I do that, it's not understood in that way. Folks refuse to identify with the concerns black people express which take us beyond race into previously undocumented emotional realms. Black images can only stand for themselves and nothing more.[5]

Here the artist laments the inability of others to see the work as engaging anything other than race. Even though everyone comes from a multiplicity of perspectives—making a truly universal voice impossible—the attempt at the collective is a fundamental element of the work.[6] Sarah Lewis, in her short preface to the 2016 *Kitchen Table Series* monograph, argues that part of what makes Weems's work great is that it "gestures to a universal horizon."[7] And yet, the problem remains. Weems speaks to it again in her 2009 conversation with fellow photographer Dawoud Bey. There she says,

> It's fair to say that black folks operate under a cloud of invisibility—this too is part of the work, is indeed central to the work…. This invisibility—this erasure out of the complex history of our life and time—is the greatest source of my longing. As you know, I'm a woman who yearns, who longs for. This is the key to me and to the work, and something which is rarely discussed in reviews or essays, which I also find remarkably disappointing. That there are so few images of African-American women circulating in popular culture or in fine art is disturbing; the pathology behind it is dangerous…. But in the face of refusal, I insist on making

---

[5] bell hooks, "Talking Art with Carrie Mae Weems," in *Art on My Mind: Visual Politics* (New York: The New Press, 1995), 76.

[6] See Susan Canning, "Interview: Carrie Mae Weems," *Art Papers* 17, no. 3 (June 5, 1993): 35–38.

[7] Sarah Lewis and Adrienne Edwards, *Kitchen Table Series* (Bologna: Damiani and Matsumoto Editions, 2016), 5.

> work that includes us as part of the greater whole. Black experience is not really the main point; rather, complex, dimensional, human experience and social inclusion—even in the shit, muck, and mire—is the real point.[8]

What does it mean that these images "should speak on many levels" but seem stuck in this "cloud of invisibility?" What does it mean that "the real point" of these works is "complex, dimensional, human experience and social inclusion?" Can black figures "represent universal concerns" in our culture? These questions form the context of Weems's work and the central themes behind it. In her picturing and telling the stories of her own black family, Weems examines this invisibility and the cultural structures that maintain it.

Weems joins a long list of other black photographers who navigate these thorny issues of racial identity and inclusion. African Americans have employed the medium since shortly after its invention to promote abolition and racial justice and to alter the cultural perception of blackness.[9] In the first seventy-five years after emancipation, photography, and more specifically photographic portraiture, became a vehicle of racial pride for African Americans and a means to undermine hostile and abhorrent stereotypes. As bell hooks states,

> When the psychohistory of a people is marked by ongoing loss, when entire histories are denied, hidden, erased, documentation can become an obsession. The camera must have seemed a magical instrument to many of the displaced and marginalized groups trying to carve out new destinies for themselves in the Americas. More than any other image-making tool, the camera offered African-

---

[8] Dawoud Bey, "Carrie Mae Weems," *Bomb* 108 (Summer 2009), https://bombmagazine.org/articles/carrie-mae-weems/.

[9] The first documented African American photographer was Jules Lion, a French immigrant to New Orleans who opened his daguerreotype studio in 1840, just a year after the form's invention. See Charles East, "Jules Lion's New Orleans," *The Georgia Review* 40, no. 4 (Winter 1986): 913–20; Deborah Willis, *Reflections In Black: A History Of Black Photographers, 1840 To The Present* (New York: Norton, 2000).

> Americans, disempowered in white culture, a way to empower ourselves through representation.[10]

The power of the camera lies in the ability of the person to craft an image that is seen as real and true. It is one of the defining conflicts of photographic history that photographs are seen as coming directly from life, even when they are constructed and manipulated. Even though photographic portraits are actively made (not passively "taken"), they are seen as visual evidence of reality. Thus, when prominent and well-to-do African Americans used the camera to make their portraits in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, they were relying on these opposing photographic ideas to create a document that undermined the persistent, racist images that were disseminated throughout culture.

Frederick Douglass, for example, circulated numerous portraits of himself over four decades that both elevated his fame and bolstered support for emancipation, all the while emphasizing his position as an upper-class black man. In his photographs, Douglass presents himself in a stylish and well-dressed manner, typically in a three-piece suit and a bow tie [Fig. 1.2]. His careful and considered appearance clearly indicates his class status. As a freed slave, Douglass was conscious of using his freed status for the benefit of the race. As Laura Wexler argues, he believed that the camera could be used as a radical tool for social change—photography was the "re-visioning" American society.[11] By emphasizing his position as both a freed slave and well to do, he

---

[10] bell hooks, "In Our Glory: Photography and Black Life," in *Art on My Mind: Visual Politics* (New York: The New Press, 1995), 59–60.

[11] Laura Wexler, "'A More Perfect Likeness': Frederick Douglass and the Image of the Nation," in *Pictures and Progress: Early Photography and the Making of African American Identity*, ed. Maurice O. Wallace and Shawn Michelle Smith (Duke University Press, 2012), 18–40.

provides an opposing image to those presented in racist caricatures of minstrel shows and ephemera. Even something as seemingly simple as having ownership of his own image, Ginger Hill argues, was radical because the photograph signaled one's self-ownership: people who own their photos control their self-image.[12] Therefore, by controlling his appearance in his photographic portraits Douglass hoped that his class status would add value to the race as a whole.

The same can be said of portraits of regular black women, as Deborah Willis argues in her essay "Picturing the New Negro Woman." She asserts that African American women demonstrated their racial pride, combatted prejudice, and sought empowerment from the 1890s to the 1940s via their physical appearance by picturing themselves in their real or sought-after lifestyles.[13] They composed their image meticulously, with details of costume, hair, adornment, and background all contributing to the message of their upper- or middle-class status. Madam C. J. Walker, the first female African American millionaire, employed these tactics in her own professional image [Fig. 1.3]. Walker prominently displayed her image on many of her products, reinforcing both her personal success and the vision of black female beauty as related to class status.[14]

Yet, the problem of stereotyping African Americans generally, and African

---

[12] Ginger Hill, "'Rightly Viewed': Theorizations of Self in Frederick Douglass's Lectures on Pictures," in *Pictures and Progress: Early Photography and the Making of African American Identity*, ed. Maurice O. Wallace and Shawn Michelle Smith (Duke University Press, 2012), 53.

[13] Deborah Willis, "Picturing the New Negro Woman," in *Black Womanhood: Images, Icons, and Ideologies of the African Body*, ed. Barbara Thompson (Hanover, NH: Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth College, 2008), 226–45.

[14] Willis, 230-1.

American women specifically, encompasses more than race and class; it also broaches issues of gender and sexuality. During the 1980s, feminist scholars became increasingly concerned with how race, class, gender, and sexuality intersect to affect one's identity. Proponents of this intersectional feminism argue that one cannot understand these elements separately, and, in fact, that they are impossible to separate. Patricia Hill Collins's 1991 book *Black Feminist Thought* articulated that history has justified the subservient position of African American women with recurring stereotypes of women and black people that speak to their level of poverty, education, suitability for motherhood, sexuality, and reliance on others for support, among other qualities—things that mix issues of race, class, gender, and sexuality. Collins calls these stereotypes controlling images because they promote prejudiced thinking to such a degree that it becomes hegemonic, or thought of as normal and natural.[15] These controlling images—such as the mammy, jezebel, welfare mother, or matriarch—determine how black women exist in the world by both describing and constituting their racial, class, gender, and sexual identity.[16]

These racist and sexist controlling images set up a no-win, binary view of black women: Women who work too much are bad mothers. Women who stay at home with the children are lazy. Single mothers must be too overbearing to keep a man around or morally corrupt. When articulating the stereotype of the black matriarch, Collins says, "Spending too much time away from home, these working mothers ostensibly could not properly supervise their children and thus were a major contributing factor to their

---

[15] Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York and London: Routledge, 2000), 7.

[16] Collins, 80.

children's failure at school. As overly aggressive, unfeminine women, Black matriarchs allegedly emasculated their lovers and husbands. These men, understandably, either deserted their partners or refused to marry the mothers of their children."[17] The controlling images make the lived experience of black women invisible or viewed only through the narrow, prejudicial lens of stereotype.

Weems takes on this no-win binary understanding of African American women in *Family Pictures and Stories* with her depictions of her mother and sisters. For example, in her portrait of her sister, *Alice* [Fig. 1.4], Weems shows her older sibling curled up on the bed and wrapped in a blanket. The image and the woman in it appear soft and warm. Yet, Weems pairs it with a caption that says,

> Alice is the oldest and is in a way my second momma; she cooked our food, washed us and our clothes, cleaned the house and when necessary whipped our behinds. She's a no jive—tough—kinda woman, taking no slack from nobody for no reason. Between her and her soft skin is a very thick coat of armor. But when it comes to family and home, she'll do anything to hold it together financially. So girl thinks nothing of getting up at 7:00 a.m. and taking a cross-town bus out to 82nd where she plays bingo so she can make the rent, the lights or anything else that needs taking care of. And seriously, I'll take my hat off to Alice any day.[18]

Here Weems tells us of a hard-working woman, doing whatever she needs to take care of her family. Her commitment to home and work do not compete with each other. The strength implied in the text contrasts with the softness of the image, which reveals a complexity not found in the stereotypical idea of a tough, working-class black woman. By pairing this image and caption, the artist contradicts the controlling images of the overbearing matriarch who fails to both work hard and be a loving mother-figure.

---

[17] Collins, 83.

[18] Weems, "Family Pictures and Stories: A Photographic Installation," 12.

These racist, sexist, and classist controlling images of black women were embraced and legitimized in 1965 by a United States government report, titled *The Negro Family: A Case for National Action,* that would go on to have a decades-long impact on American life, culture, and art.[19] This report—issued by then Assistant Secretary of Labor Daniel Patrick Moynihan and informally called the Moynihan Report—caused controversy from the moment it became public. Intended as an internal document to convince President Lyndon B. Johnson of the need for federal intervention in African American employment, the Moynihan Report argued that black poverty—as a result of slavery's destruction of family structures—was fundamentally different from white poverty.

After President Johnson relied heavily on the report for a speech at Howard University, a government official leaked the document to the press. Soon after, the Moynihan Report became a source of contention in large part because of its provocatively racist and sexist language, such as its use of the word "pathology" to describe the prominence of female-headed African American households. It argued, "In essence the Negro community has been forced into a matriarchal structure which, because it is to [*sic*] out of line with the rest of the American society, seriously retards the progress of the group as a whole, and imposes a crushing burden on the Negro male and, in consequence, on a great many Negro women as well."[20] This "crushing burden"

---

[19] This is not to say that it was the first document (or even government report) to legitimate the claims of African American pathology and dysfunction. However, this report had and continues to have an outsized influence on the public perception of African Americans.

[20] Daniel Patrick Moynihan, "The Negro Family: A Case for National Action" (Washington, D.C.: Office of Policy Planning and Research, Department of Labor, 1965), 6–9, http://www.dol.gov/oasam/programs/history/webid-

involved a lack of stable jobs for black men, which, Moynihan believed, leads to violence and familial abandonment.[21] This report and its inflammatory rhetoric popularized the phrase "blaming the victim"[22] and inspired responses from activists and artists alike.

The Moynihan Report deems the marital status of working women like Weems's sister Alice as major contributing factors to the economic crisis of African Americans. It emphasizes statistics of black marriage among the poor and working class and contrasts the increasing rates of single mothers, divorce, and illegitimate births among African Americans with those of European Americans. Purposely excluding middle-class black families from the study (though not excluding middle-class white families), the report unsurprisingly finds that the familial structure of white Americans is more stable and conforms to the pattern idealized by the very same white Americans.[23] Consequently, it paints a picture of crisis and ruin as it argues, "At the heart of the deterioration of the fabric of Negro society is the deterioration of the Negro family."[24] The report takes the patriarchal structure of the family as given and asserts that to get ahead in the United States black families must conform to the so-called traditional family arrangement. In

---

meynihan.htm#.UMH4sZPjk4m.

[21] Douglas S. Massey and Robert J. Sampson, "Introduction: Moynihan Redux: Legacies and Lessons," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 621 (January 2009): 6.

[22] The phrase was popularized in the 1971 book *Blaming the Victim* by William Ryan, a journalist for *The Nation*, which he wrote to refute the language and claims of the Moynihan Report. See William Ryan, *Blaming the Victim* (New York: Random House, 1971).

[23] Moynihan, "Moynihan Report," ii. For more information on the methodological failings of the report, see L. Alex Swan, "A Methodological Critique of the Moynihan Report," *The Black Scholar* 5, no. 9 (1974): 18–24.

[24] Moynihan, "Moynihan Report," 5.

the section titled “The Tangle of Pathology,” it states, “Ours is a society which presumes male leadership in private and public affairs. The arrangements of society facilitate such leadership and reward it. A subculture, such as that of the Negro American, in which this is not the pattern, is placed at a distinct disadvantage.”[25] Statements such as these suggest that black people are responsible to imitate white people in order to be economically, socially, and psychologically accepted.

Another of the prejudicial claims of the report associates black family structure with high crime rates. As Collins articulated above, the Moynihan Report generalizes a correlation between the two—even though, by its own estimation, the statistics behind that are suspect. It states: “It is probable that at present, a majority of the crimes against the person, such as rape, murder, and aggravated assault are committed by Negroes,” while conceding that there “is, of course, no absolute evidence” for this claim beyond “inference” from “unquestionably…biased” arrest and incarceration statistics. In the face of that admitted bias and doubt, it still asserts that “it may be doubted that the bias is great enough to affect the general proportions.”[26] Statements such as these outraged black activists and artists, and many set out to correct the record with their work.

In the wake of the Moynihan Report, Chicago’s African American art group Africobra responded with critiques in the form of positive affirmations of black families. In 1969—four years after the release of the report—the group held their first exhibition, which they titled The Black Family in open opposition to it.[27] Many of the included

---

[25] Moynihan, "Moynihan Report," 29.

[26] Moynihan, "Moynihan Report," 38.

[27] Rebecca Zorach, “‘Dig the Diversity in Unity’: AfriCOBRA’s Black Family,” *Afterall: A Journal of Art, Context and Enquiry*, no. 28 (Fall/Winter 2011): 106.

artworks addressed issues discussed within the government document, such as the status of the family and the role of men and women within it. However, while rejecting the arguments of pathology within black family structure, they also affirmed the patriarchal structure of families the report holds up as ideal. One painting shown in the exhibition, *Black Family* [Fig. 1.5] by Africobra founder Wadsworth Jarrell, counteracts the stereotypes of African American families propagated by Moynihan through its prideful depiction of a family headed by a strong father-figure. The man stands behind the seated woman and the children with his arms wrapped around them and his hands resting on the older child's chest and the woman's shoulder. The oversized proportion of his hands and arms support the notion that he protects and provides for this family. This painting rejects the idea of a matriarchal black family structure, and, like Moynihan, celebrates a male-headed household.

The women of Africobra also addressed gender roles within African American families in their artwork from a similar point of view. Carolyn Lawrence's *Uphold Your Man, Unify Your Families* [Fig. 1.6] from 1971 shows an African American woman looking fierce with her arms crossed and a strong, calm expression on her face. With the words of the title printed in the background, the message is clear: black women need to support the black men in their lives. In *Uphold Your Man, Unify Your Families* and *Black Family*, Lawrence, Jarrell, and the other members of Africobra combat the negative stereotypes of the Moynihan Report by conforming to the normative family standards. Instead of fighting the flawed statistics, they instead reaffirm the report's patriarchal view of family.

Like Africobra, Weems specifically hoped to undercut these controlling images of

black men and women purported by the Moynihan Report in *Family Pictures*.[28] Yet instead of following the dominant pattern of gendered family roles and highlighting only images of provider father-figures and supportive mother-figures, this series portrays a family that does not fit into the rigid ideal. Rather, it pictures people working hard to support their families, doing what they can to get by, as we saw in *Alice* above. Weems includes in the series images and stories that highlight both her mother's and father's roles as working parents. In both *Dad sorting and packing cow hides* [Fig. 1.7] and *Momma at work* [Fig. 1.8], the artist presents us with scenes from their place of employment. In the former image, Weems's father, Myrlie, stands in a concrete-block factory with piles of animal skins around him. Surrounded by other workers, Myrlie has an air of authority about him, distinguished from the others by his neat clothes and lack of apron. In the latter, Weems shows her mother, Carrie Polk-Kemp, in the center of the frame with her arms outstretched and a wonderfully happy expression on her face. She stands at her workstation with spools of black thread on the right corner of the image while other women are busy at work behind her. With these images, Weems uses photographic portraits of her parents to work against the stereotypes of African Americans. Unlike the early-twentieth-century portraits of prominent black folks, like Douglass and Walker, however, Weems does this by emphasizing her family's working-class status alongside their family roles.

In an influential 1988 essay on what he labels "anti-documentarian" photography, Wallis argues that Weems and other young artists (like Trinh T. Minh-ha and Lorna Simpson, among others) reject the formal rules of documentary photography

[28] Andrea Kirsch, "Carrie Mae Weems: Issues in Black, White and Color," in *Carrie Mae Weems* (Washington, D.C.: National Museum of Women in the Arts, 1994), 12.

and resist the idea that equates photography and truth.[29] In this photo-essay, Wallis argues that photographs are not made out of nothing; they are created in specific contexts and by specific people and mix the aesthetic, political, and social. He points out two implications of this: one, "photography takes part in an institution of power" that at all times "involves a subtle narrative of selection, segregation, definition, and denial" and two, you can see or interpret the narrative (especially where it is "confining, misleading, or exclusive") when you understand the discourse of photography.[30]

Weems, along with her contemporaries mentioned by Wallis in this essay, tries to make the constructed nature of this power by including fictional elements and storytelling. As Wallis points out, she is deeply indebted to past practices of documentary photography, but also tries to subvert it. He argues, "For these artist/photographers, documentary constitutes a critical investigation of the process of documenting—that is, as examination of the institutional formations, means for exchange, and social stereotypes that position subjects in photography—rather than an unquestioned process of representing."[31] By mixing the formal conventions of documentary photography with the tactics of storytelling, Weems refuses and undermines the controlling images that oppress and confine African Americans.

[29] Brian Wallis, "Questioning Documentary," *Aperture*, no. 112 (1988): 60.

[30] Wallis, 60.

[31] Wallis, 60.

Family Albums

> *Freedom is inextricably tied to the power to construct one's image.*
> ~Thomas Allen Harris[32]

Family Pictures and Stories uses the representational space of the family album to explore the politics of photography and the cultural construction of power. By manipulating truth and stories, Weems questions the process of representation and its consequences. It evokes the aesthetics of photo albums through the relationship between image and text and uses the captions to create a sense of intimacy between the viewer and the Weems family.

Several critics and curators have employed the analogy of family photo albums when discussing *Family Pictures and Stories* because of its subject matter.[33] Yet, the connection stems not only from its familiar intimacy but also from the formal aspects of the photographs and their installation. The images employ a snapshot aesthetic like that made famous by Garry Winogrand—one of Weems's primary early influences—and in doing so, rejects the preciousness of early fine art photography in favor of a deceivingly casual look inspired by amateur picture making, as we can see in the composition of photographs such as *Family Reunion* [Fig. 1.9] and *Carrie Mae* [Fig. 1.10].[34] In the

---

[32] Thomas Allen Harris, *Through a Lens Darkly: Black Photographers and the Emergence of a People* (First Run Features, 2014), 19:20-35.

[33] Trevor Fairbrother, *Family Ties: A Contemporary Perspective* (Salem, MA: Peabody Essex Museum with Marquand Books, 2003), 87; Kirsch, "Carrie Mae Weems: Issues in Black, White and Color," 11–12; Canning, "Interview," 35; Andrea Miller-Keller, Judith Wilson, and Carrie Mae Weems, *Carrie Mae Weems/MATRIX 115, April 21-July7, 1991* (Hartford, Conn.: Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, 1991), 2.

[34] Charmaine Picard, "A Q & A with Carrie Mae Weems," *Modern Painters*, January 2014, 69.

latter, the artist and her father pose together on a chair in the family home. The casual framing and backlit figures suggest a quick click of the shutter. Likewise, *Family Reunion* feels similarly casual. Here we see what happens just before a more formal portrait: a man stands with his back to the camera and hands in the air like the conductor of a symphony, organizing and moving the extended family around to make sure no one is left out. It is easy to imagine these pictures tucked or pasted into a book along with other photographs that celebrate and document Weems's family life.

Some installations of *Family Pictures* suggest the casual organization of a picture album with the placement of the photographs. In both the 2012 retrospective and the 2016 show "We Wanted a Revolution," the curators grouped the images in a salon hanging with pictures of various sizes grouped closely together and at multiple heights. This recalls the arrangement of personal photographs in an old album, where images were often haphazardly pasted onto the page in a mix of sizes, shapes, and types. But this reference to the family album is not limited to the pictures; even the captions and audio playing overhead evoke family intimacy. The recording features the artist narrating the Weems family's history, gossip, and tall tales, something that enhances a sense of rapport with viewers. While we, as viewers, might not be family members sitting around listening to things we've heard a thousand times before, we are granted special access that belies our outsider status. Depending on when you arrive, you might hear how the Polk or Weems families came to Oregon from eastern Mississippi, speculation on their ancestors, or stories about which sibling lost their job or got into trouble recently. In the captions, Weems continues the sense of familiar storytelling: for *Carrie Mae*, she writes, "Daddy says, 'What I like about you Carrie Mae is you can talk that talk to them white folks, that's one thing about you I sho do like and you smart too,

just like your Daddy!" While other images are labeled simply and descriptively, just as they often are in photo albums: "Terry Lee and his baby girl," "Daddy and Son-Son," or "Momma at work."

Even so, the connection between *Family Pictures and Stories* and family photo albums is not simply an aesthetic one; it is also political. From the mid-nineteenth century to the first quarter of the twentieth, photography became a crucial element to constructing black self-identity in the United States. As we saw from the portraits of Frederick Douglass and Madame C. J. Walker, African Americans used portraiture to model and circulate pictures that positively reflected their own subjectivity and bolstered the image of African Americans in society.[35] For them, images of respectable and prominent African Americans elevated the position of black people throughout the United States and granted relief from oppressive and negative stereotypes.

Thomas Allen Harris explores this aspect of photography in his documentary film *Through the Lens Darkly*, where he argues, "freedom is inextricably tied to the power to construct one's image."[36] Through interviews with artists and scholars, Harris demonstrates the relationship of image and power in black photography and photo albums. Harris and his photographer brother Lyle Ashton Harris muse on family and picture-making through stories of their grandfather, the unofficial documenter of their family history. This grandfather—who gave both brothers their first camera— embraced

---

[35] See also Hill, "'Rightly Viewed': Theorizations of Self in Frederick Douglass's Lectures on Pictures"; Wexler, "'A More Perfect Likeness': Frederick Douglass and the Image of the Nation"; Darcy Grimaldo Grigsby, "Negative-Positive Truths," *Representations* 113, no. 1 (Winter 2011): 16–38.

[36] Harris, *Through a Lens Darkly: Black Photographers and the Emergence of a People*, 28:20-35.

the power of photographic portraiture.[37] He even placed Douglass's portrait in the family photo album alongside the pictures of weddings, reunions, and everyday life, Thomas Harris recalls.[38] By including these portraits of celebrities and political figures like Douglass, the Harris family album became a representation of the larger black family. Richard Powell notes that hero portraiture was a common decorative style for nineteenth- and twentieth-century black families. It honored and modeled exemplary work of prominent African Americans and others, from Lincoln and Douglass in the nineteenth century to King and the Kennedy brothers in the twentieth century.[39] But the use of photographic portraiture to elevate and honor role models like Douglass extends to the portraiture of regular black men and women too, as Willis explained in her essay on the portraiture of New Negro women.[40]

Allan Sekula argues that the relationship between photography and power lies in the former's ability to visualize and give form to abstract ideologies such as history, government, family, and identity.[41] This power led to tension between two primary modes of nineteenth-century photographic portraiture: that of the bourgeois self and that of the other. While the former category relates to "proper portraits" of the famous and the wealthy, the latter contains photographic types like mug shots, ethnographic photography, and minstrel posters. In Sekula's words: "Both attempts are motivated by

---

[37] Harris, 5:15-6:05.

[38] Harris, 19:10-35.

[39] Richard J. Powell, "Lamentations from the 'Hood," in *Kerry James Marshall: Mementos* (Chicago: The Renaissance Society at The University of Chicago, 1998), 33.
[40] See also Willis, "Picturing the New Negro Woman."

[41] Allan Sekula, "The Traffic in Photographs," *Art Journal*, Spring 1981, 15.

an uneasy belief in the category of the individual."[42] For African Americans, the inverse of portraits of Douglass, Madame Walker, and other elites is the blanket of negative images showing performers in blackface, mammies, pickaninnies, and lynchings. Black portraiture—and family photo albums as spaces that contain these portraits—becomes a site of negotiating this tension. In other words, the African American family photo album is not simply a place to store one's memories of extended family, but rather a place where communal identity is positively crafted against the negativity found in other images. Unlike the earlier mode of African American portraiture, *Family Pictures and Stories* negotiates this conflict with pictures of Weems's working-class family instead of images of the famous and wealthy.

During the 1950s, the idea of family photography moved from the realm of the private album to that of the museum with Edward Steichen's exhibition "The Family of Man" at Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in 1955 [Fig. 1.11]. The exhibition—which featured 503 photographs from 68 countries by 273 photographers and was ultimately seen by 9 million people in 85 exhibitions in 69 countries (not counting the sale of 4 million copies of the catalogue in the first two decades of its publication)—purports to showcase the universal experiences of humanity through emotions, relationships, and family life.[43] There is tension, however, in its claim to both universality and the "editorial achievement" of Steichen in telling "his story," as the *New York Times* reviewer Jacob Deschin describes it.[44] Sekula explains,

---

[42] Sekula, 16.

[43] Sekula, 20; Jacob Deschin, "'Family of Man'; Panoramic Show Opens At Modern Museum," *The New York Times*, January 30, 1955, sec. Photography, X17.

[44] Deschin, "Family of Man."

> If nothing else, *The Family of Man* was a massive promotion for family photography, as well as a celebration of the power of the mass media to represent the whole world in familiar and intimate forms.... The exhibition simultaneously suggested a family album, a juried show for photo hobbyists, an apotheosis of *Life* magazine, and the magnum opus in Steichen's illustrious career.[45]

The connection between family photography and universality appeared again in 1955 with the publication of a collaborative book by Roy DeCarava and Langston Hughes, *The Sweet Flypaper of Life*. With photographs by DeCarava and text by Hughes, the book reflects on life in Harlem through the eyes of a fictional family. The shared project came about after the publishing company Simon and Schuster agreed to print DeCarava's photographs under the condition that the more-famous Hughes write an accompanying text. DeCarava handed over 500 images to Hughes without notes, and he constructed his own story from them.[46] Much of its initial reception remarked on the realism of the fictional family and their life in Harlem. Instead of examining the constructed elements of its narrative, like the stitching together of disparate images to fabricate a story, critics like Gilbert Millstein of the *New York Times Book Review* instead remarked on the "astonishing verisimilitude" of this "fiction-document of life in Harlem" and argued that the artist book could change American race relations, thus conflating fiction with truth and Harlem with all of black America.

Hughes in *The Sweet Flypaper of Life* tells the story of a single family, written in the voice of the central female character, whom he calls Sister Mary. The photographs of

---

[45] Sekula, "The Traffic in Photographs," 20.

[46] Consequently, *The Sweet Flypaper of Life* is less a product of collaboration between the two artists, but rather a literary response to the images. Alan Thomas, "Alan Thomas on Roy DeCavara," October 2009, https://sites.google.com/site/roydecaravareview/. Originally published as "Literary snapshots of the sho-nuff blues," by Alan Thomas in *In These Times*, March 27-April 2, 1985.

Sister Mary, her children, in-laws, grandchildren, and their home are woven into the text as Hughes ends many of his sentences with colons and hyphens so that the image acts as the completing phrase. For example, in a two-page spread [Fig. 1.12], Sister Mary describes how Rodney—the ne'er-do-well grandson she worries over—tells her of his generation's love of cars. On the left page are two sentences that end in colons with images of young people looking at cars, and facing that is a full-page photograph of a Harlem street lined in automobiles.[47]

In many ways, *The Sweet Flypaper of Life* is the starting point for *Family Pictures and Stories*, including both its subject matter and its snapshot aesthetic. Yet, it is Hughes's creative merging of text and image that Weems expands upon the most with her mixed-media work. While books like *The Sweet Flypaper of Life* and family photo albums typically are experienced linearly by physically moving pages back and forth as you read the words and look at the images, *Family Pictures and Stories* uses the elements of time and order differently. Our attention moves between image, written captions, and auditory stories with no set order, and, as we do so, the narrative shifts as well. Brian Wallis notes in *Through the Lens Darkly* that African American photographic portraits and the albums are "a representational system in action," a place where exchanges of pictures—portraits of family, friends, and celebrities— visually demonstrate their personal, familial, and cultural ties.[48] Weems taps into the active nature of representation in the family album by making her viewers look, listen, and

---

[47] Roy DeCarava and Langston Hughes, *The Sweet Flypaper of Life* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1955), 14–15.

[48] Harris, *Through a Lens Darkly: Black Photographers and the Emergence of a People*, 28:15-25.

read simultaneously.

By making the active nature of the family photo album plain, *Family Pictures and Stories* makes the active nature of representation evident as well. When she intermixes stories from her family with those from American history, Weems demonstrates how the latter has fundamentally shaped the experiences of black Americans. Consequently, the series explores how the representational space of the family photo album acts as a means to negotiate power, culture, and self-identity.

Autoethnography

> *Like the dead-seeming, cold rocks, I have memories within that came out of the material that went to make me. Time and place have had their say. So you will have to know something about the time and place where I came from, in order that you may interpret the incidents and directions of my life.* ~Zora Neale Hurston[49]

Family Pictures and Stories responds to the oppressive, racist, and sexist dynamics of society by merging autobiography and ethnography. As such, it is both a document of a specific family and an exploration of culture, history, and power from a black female perspective. Black female intellectual and creative endeavors that identify and assess these structures of power, like Weems's work in *Family Pictures*, are often rooted in what Michele Wallace calls "a tradition of speaking out of turn":

> I also realized that to define a "tradition" that integrates black female critical voices is to be forced to confront the way in which such voices have been systematically excluded from previous notions of "tradition." It is, in other words, a "tradition" of speaking out of turn. The reasons for this are not inherent in the nature of black women, but are rather structural; they derive from the "outsider"

[49] Zora Neale Hurston, "Dust Tracks on a Road," in *Folklore, Memoirs, and Other Writings* (New York: The Library of America, 1995), 561.

position we tend to occupy in critical discourse.[50]

Because black women are relegated to the position of other or outsider, they have a limited ability to participate in the production of knowledge. Often times, the only space for their participation is through the articulation of their own place and perspective as African American women. As an exploration of black family life from the outlook of a black woman, the working method of *Family Pictures and Stories* merges the autobiographical with the ethnological.

Weems is not alone in this approach. In the twentieth century, black female scholars across disciplines used autobiography and ethnography as a means of academic investigation. Take, for example, the work of Zora Neale Hurston. A writer of both fiction and ethnography, Hurston's works examine the lives of black, Southern women such as herself and often makes her own roles as both participant and observer evident in her texts. After studying anthropology at Columbia University, Hurston moved back to her hometown of Eatonville, Florida to conduct ethnographic fieldwork. In *Mules and Men* (1935), Hurston weaves the narrative of her search with the folk stories she collects.[51] From the outset, she includes her hearing of the tale along with the tale itself. As the reader learns the story of John and the frog, Hurston also records the conversation that surrounds the old men's telling of it.[52] She includes their disbelief at

---

[50] Michele Wallace, "Variations on Negation and the Heresy of Black Feminist Creativity," in *Invisibility Blues: From Pop to Theory* (New York and London: Verso, 1990), 215.

[51] Some of her sources call these stories "lies." Zora Neale Hurston, "Mules and Men," in *Folklore, Memoirs, and Other Writings* (New York: The Library of America, 1995), 13.

[52] John and the frog is the story of African American folk hero John, who in many stories (either in spite of or because of being the center of the joke) defeats Ole Massa and the devil with his cunning. See Hurston, "Mules and Men," 13-14.

her purpose ("'Zora, don't you come here and tell de biggest lie first thing. Who you reckon want to read all them old-time tales about Brer Rabbit and Brer Bear?'") and their friendly competition for her eager attention once they got started ("Long before Calvin had ended his story James had lost his air of patience. 'Now, Ah'll tell one,' he said.")[53] When she incorporates the story that surrounds the collecting of folktales of her research, Hurston actively inserts herself into her ethnographic work. She uses her own story as a vehicle for relating its cultural importance.

Largely rejected by the academic and literary communities during her lifetime, Hurston died poor and was buried in an unmarked grave. Her grave remained unmarked until Alice Walker devoted great time and effort to uncover it decades later. Walker's 1975 essay "Looking for Zora" takes its cues from "Mules and Men" as it simultaneously documents the search and outlines the gap in literary history left by the absence of African American women writers.[54] In doing so, Walker mimics Hurston's practice of writing about her lived experience in her academic works. Similarly, Weems marks her discovery of Hurston's writings as the impetus for her own work from that first encounter with the 1937 novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* on a bus ride from San Francisco to San Diego.[55]

Weems, Walker, and Hurston all integrate autobiography with their ethnographic

---

[53] Hurston, "Mules and Men," 13–14, 16.

[54] Alice Walker, "Looking for Zora," in *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* (Orlando and New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2004), 93–116.

[55] Quoted by Kathryn E. Delmez, "'Real Facts, by Real People:' Folklore in the Early Works of Carrie Mae Weems," in *Carrie Mae Weems: Three Decades of Photography and Video*, ed. Kathryn E. Delmez (New Haven and London: Frist Center for the Visual Arts in association with Yale University Press, 2012), 13 and 260, note 12.

explorations of American culture. In her 2009 lecture at the Sackler Center for Feminist Art at the Brooklyn Museum, Weems explains why, after graduating from UC San Diego with her MFA, she returned to graduate school to study in the Folklore Program at Berkeley. She says, "In some strange way, I sort of worked my way through this maze of interest… in art, [through] cultural history and the history of culture. For me, I went through that door via the lens of folklore."[56] By recording the stories of her origins—interviewing her mother, Carrie Polk Weems, about the Polk family in Alabama and recording the stories of her father about his family—she follows the traditions of story-collecting and anthropological investigation demonstrated by Hurston and Walker.[57]

Just as Hurston returned home to study the people of Eatonville, Weems returned to her hometown to tell the story of her family in *Family Pictures and Stories*. In *Welcome Home* [Fig. 1.13], Weems shares the story of going back to Portland, Oregon, and the feelings of trepidation, anticipation, and joy that come with a return after an extended absence. With this image, Weems provides a paragraph-length caption that reads:

> I went back home this summer. Hadn't seen my folks for awhile, but I'd been thinking about them, felt a need to say something about them, about us, about me and to record something about our family, our history. I was scared. Of what? I don't know, but on my first night back, I was welcomed with so much love from Van and Vera, that I thought to myself, "Girl, this is your family. Go on and get down."

Like Hurston telling her readers about her frustration and trepidation upon her return to Florida alongside the ethnographic work in *Mules and Men*, Weems mixes her own

---

[56] Brooklyn Museum, *Carrie Mae Weems at the Sackler Center for Feminist Art*, 2009, 9:01-9:10, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WabrgaaRTj8.

[57] See Hurston, "Mules and Men"; Delmez, "'Real Facts, by Real People:' Folklore in the Early Works of Carrie Mae Weems."

memory and perception of the world with her photography.

As we saw above in the photograph *Carrie Mae* [Fig. 1.10], Weems is both author and object in *Family Pictures*. We see her posing in front of the camera, and we hear her voice as she narrates the story of her family. At one moment in the audio, she tells us of her conflicted relationship with her brother Son-Son. She says that he thought she wanted to be white—"or at least non-black"—and calls her names like "patty-lover" and "Uncle Tom." Weems explains, "I told him I was comfortable with my black self, that I did my black thing. I did it to a slightly different drumbeat. But I did it all the same."[58] Weems merges autobiography with ethnography as she connects her story and her family's story to American history and racial relations. Furthermore, these anecdotes and pictures become ethnographic materials as she uses them to extrapolate on what it means to be black in the United States.

By becoming both subject and object in *Family Pictures,* Weems plays with the power dynamics associated with looking versus being looked at, something that Laura Mulvey analyzed in her 1975 "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." Mulvey's classic text demonstrates how patriarchy and the subconscious shape our experience of cinema. She argues that Hollywood uses women to enhance the viewing experience for men and assumes that men are always the bearer of the gaze. This leaves women in the passive role of object and men in the active role of viewer.[59] In the decade that followed its

---

[58] A heartfelt thanks to Kathleen Delmez and the others at the Frist Center for providing me with the text for the audio portion. All quotes from the audio recording portion of *Family Pictures* in this text come from that unpublished document.

[59] Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," in *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader*, ed. Amelia Jones (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), 47. Originally published as Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," in *Screen* 16:3 (Autumn 1975), 6-18.

publication, black scholars such as Wallace, Manthia Diawara, Stuart Hall, and bell hooks reworked the idea of the male gaze found in Mulvey's essay to understand the implications behind raced (instead of gendered) spectatorship.[60] Moving from Mulvey's notions of "active/male" and "passive/female" or "woman as image, man as bearer of the look,"[61] they examined the idea of black as image, white as bearer of look. This idea traces back to Franz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*, where he states, "[H]ere I am an object among other objects…. The Other fixes me with his gaze, his gestures and attitude, the same way you fix a preparation with a dye."[62]

Collins argues in *Black Feminist Thought*, "Objectification is central to this process of oppositional difference. In binary thinking, one element is objectified as the Other, and is viewed as an object to be manipulated and controlled."[63] Weems overturns this so that she is both the manipulated object and the controlling force. In doing so, she articulates the consequences of power as they relate to race and gender, demonstrating the importance of telling one's own story as a counter measure. Instead of being an "object among other objects" fixed "the same way you fix a preparation with a dye," as

---

[60] See Manthia Diawara, "Black Spectatorship: Problems of Identification and Resistance," in *Black American Cinema*, ed. Manthia Diawara (London: Routledge, 1993), 211–20; Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Cinematic Representation," *Framework* 36 (1989): 68–82; bell hooks, "The Oppositional Gaze," in *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End Press, 1992), 115–31; Michele Wallace, "Race, Gender, and Psychoanalysis in Forties Film: *Lost Boundaries*, *Home of the Brave*, and *The Quiet One*," in *Black American Cinema*, ed. Manthia Diawara (London: Routledge, 1993), 257–71.

[61] Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," 47.

[62] Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2008), 89.

[63] Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 77–78.

Fanon says in *Black Skin, White Masks*,[64] Weems has flipped the script and become both the actor and the acted upon.

Artist Lorraine O'Grady, in her essay "Olympia's Maid: Reclaiming Black Female Subjectivity," argues that rejecting binary thinking is fundamental to "winning back the questioning subject position."[65] In contrast to Mulvey, O'Grady argues, "The black female's body needs less to be rescued from the masculine 'gaze' than to be sprung from an historic script surrounding her with signification while at the same time, and not paradoxically, it erases her completely."[66] By becoming both subject and author, Weems rejects this historic erasure and embraces hooks's argument that "There is power in looking."[67]

Around the time Weems was beginning *Family Pictures,* Audre Lorde was publishing her 1982 work *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*. In this work, as with the works of Weems and Hurston, autobiography and ethnography play a powerful role in the quest for a voice. Lorde opens the book with the following question: "To whom do I owe the power of my voice, what strength I have become, yeasting up like sudden blood from my bruised skin's blister?"[68] *Zami* is, in the author's words, "a biomythography," or a fiction that incorporates biography and ethnography. Lorde explains to Claudia

---

[64] Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 89.

[65] Lorraine O'Grady, "Olympia's Maid: Reclaiming Black Female Subjectivity," in *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader*, ed. Amelia Jones (New York and London: Routledge, 2003), 180.

[66] O'Grady, 179.

[67] hooks, "The Oppositional Gaze," 115.

[68] Audre Lorde, *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (Watertown, MA: Persephone Press, 1982), 3.

Tate in *Black Women Writers at Work*, "It has the elements of biography and history of myth. In other words, it's fiction built from many sources. This is one way of expanding our vision."[69] In *Zami*, she uses elements from her past along with fiction to articulate her journey toward the discovery of herself and her place in the world. Collins states in *Black Feminist Thought*, "When faced with this structural injustice targeted toward the group, many Black women have insisted on our right to define our own reality, establish our own identities, and name our history."[70] Both Lorde and Weems use their voices and stories to investigate the reality in which they find themselves.

Kellie Jones delves into the work of voice, text, and photography in her 1990 *Artforum* article "In Their Own Image," where she discusses several female artists of color, including Weems, Lorna Simpson, Clarissa Sligh, and Pat Ward Williams. Here she points out how text directs what the images communicate about black women in the world.[71] In a discussion of Clarissa Sligh's manipulated family portraits, Jones argues that the text is a corrective tool that reflects the artist's memories. For instance, Sligh writes on *Waiting for Daddy* (1987) [Fig. 1.14],

> Here we are waiting for Daddy to take our picture in front of Grandma's back porch. It encloses the well from which we draw the water. The water is always cold, even in summer, when the snails come to live inside. An icebox, containing food, sits in the far corner. When it gets to be really hot, the iceman brings a big block of ice everyday—sometimes, we make ice cream. I am a very happy kid. In this house, Grandma is in charge.

As Jones argues, Sligh's text pays more attention to the snails, hot summers, and

---

[69] Claudia Tate, ed., *Black Women Writers at Work* (New York: Continuum, 1983), 115.
[70] Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 79.

[71] Kellie Jones, "In Their Own Image," in *EyeMinded: Living and Writing Contemporary Art* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011), 330. Originally published as Kellie Jones, "In Their Own Image," *Artforum* 29 (November 1990): 133–38.

icemen—things that come from her own personal memory—than the family dressed in their Sunday best.[72] Yet, the disrupted form of the phrases belies this idyllic message and image. Sligh's handwriting on the photograph is broken up by the people in the picture—sentences and even words are interrupted by the image. It is an intervention physically with the object of the photographic print and interpretively with its apparent message. The title, *Waiting on Daddy,* underscores the idea that Sligh's father is both there and not-there in the work. While the first line of text implies the presence of the father behind the camera, it also reveals a matriarchal structure with Grandma at the head of this family. The fractured nature of the text alludes to the Moynihan Report's notion of the broken black family; nevertheless, it undermines this racist and sexist stereotype.

Like Sligh in *Waiting for Daddy,* Weems uses conflicts in her images and texts to underscore the constructed nature of photography and identity. In *Jessie* [Fig. 1.15], Weems uses her text to push the meaning of the image. This photograph—in which we see a woman and two children walking through ankle-deep water—is captioned with the following statement: "Jessie believed in satisfying her man. And when it came to Tommy, Jessie was blind in one eye and couldn't see out the other, loved the brother more than she loved herself. Robbed a bank to keep him from going to jail. Crazy about him. I guess that's one of the reasons she and her babies are out here wading in the water." As viewers, we cannot know whether the woman in the picture robbed a bank for her partner or if she and the children are literally in the flooded waters of the picture because of him. Still, the text intervenes in our interpretation of the image, highlighting

[72] Jones, "In Their Own Image," 2011, 334.

gender in familial and romantic relationships. Weems uses the passage and image to draw our attention to broader cultural issues, like those of gender, race, and class. Consequently, the accuracy of these stories is less important than what they might say about life in the United States while disadvantaged or, as Weems says, "poor, black, working class, and a woman to boot."[73]

In *Family Pictures and Stories*, Weems merges aspects of autobiography and ethnography to explore the broader implications of race, class, and gender within American culture. Like Hurston, who opens her autobiography *Dust on the Tracks* by saying, "Like the dead-seeming, cold rocks, I have memories within that came out of the material that went to make me," Weems mines the material of her memory to speak to her condition in the world. In this way, she joins with other black feminist artists and scholars who use their own stories as a vehicle for understanding things beyond themselves. Lorde explains:

> This is so important that it bears repeating. I write for those women who do not speak, for those who do not have a voice because they/we were so terrified, because we are taught to respect fear more than ourselves. We've been taught that silence would save us, but it won't. We must learn to respect ourselves and our needs more than the fear of our differences, and we must learn to share ourselves with each other.[74]

In *Family Pictures and Stories*, Weems effectively uses her voice to articulate the consequences of power through the remembered and constructed elements of her own family's story.

---

[73] Weems, "Family Pictures and Stories: A Photographic Installation," 1.
[74] Claudia Tate, ed., "Audre Lorde," in *Black Women Writers at Work* (New York: Continuum, 1983), 105, emphasis in the original.

Recollection

> *To name ourselves rather than be named, we must first see ourselves.*
> ~Lorraine O'Grady[75]

While the working method of *Family Pictures and Stories* can be described as autobiography-as-ethnography, Weems has insisted from the outset that the series should not be taken as factual.[76] By working with "photographs, narratives, autobiographical accounts and hearsay," Weems intentionally blurs the line between truth and fiction in her family album.[77] These fictive elements reflect the fuzzy nature of memory and recollection. She explains the relationship between storytelling and autobiography in her work in a 1994 interview:

> …even though I've been engaged in the idea of autobiography, other ideas have been more important: the role of narrative, the social levels of humor, the deconstruction of documentary, the construction of history, the use of text, storytelling, performance, and the role of memory have all been more central to my thinking than autobiography. It's assumed that autobiography is key, because I so often use myself, my own of experience [*sic*]—limited as it is at times—as the starting point. 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.[78]

In *Family Pictures*, Weems embraces storytelling, humor, performance, and recollection to differentiate the series from an ordinary collection of family photographs or the ethnographic fieldwork. Instead of being an account of just the Weems family, it uses their stories and recollections to point toward the constructed nature of power and history.

---

[75] O'Grady, "Olympia's Maid," 176.

[76] Weems, "Family Pictures and Stories: A Photographic Installation," 1.

[77] Weems, 1.

[78] Bey, "Carrie Mae Weems."

African Americans have used memory and autobiography—especially with written accounts such as slave narratives—as a means to demonstrate their place in history since the late 18th century.[79] By using their personal experiences as interventions into history, "the individual bears witness for the whole of the group…. It is an act of remembrance, of calling on the memory that implicates the collective," Kellie Jones explains.[80] In the 1980s, artists like Weems and Pat Ward Williams used their photography to explore the relationship between personal memory and history. In her 1986 work *Ghosts that Smell Like Cornbread* [Fig. 1.16], Williams uses family snapshots to question the historical absence of black figures and narratives. An arched window frame holds a photomontage of family photographs. Set on a table with rocks and a broken teacup in front of it, the hinged, wooden frame looks like an altar. In the bottom right corner, we see Williams's hands holding some of the snapshots. Other pictures seem to fan out from those into the larger, collaged images, as if their purpose is to "trace a lost family history."[81] By placing these family photographs in an altar-like enclosure, the artist brings together themes of personal history, loss, and social history.

Weems's weaving of the individual and social, in contrast, destabilizes the seeming neutrality of photographic documentation and instead encourages questioning the representational process. Her storytelling in *Family Pictures* uses the hazy nature of

---

[79] Henry Louis Gates Jr., *Bearing Witness: Selections from African-American Autobiography in The Twentieth Century* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1991), 4.

[80] Kellie Jones, "Pat Ward Williams: Photography and Social/Personal History," in *EyeMinded: Living and Writing Contemporary Art* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011), 208. Originally published in Kellie Jones, *Pat Ward Williams: Probable Cause* (Philadelphia: Moore College of Art and Design, 1992).

[81] Frazer Ward, "Foreign and Familiar Bodies," in *Dirt and Domesticity: Constructions of the Feminine* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1992), 32.

recollection and the personal bias of memory to question social power and disrupt the ideas of representation, identity, and history. For instance, in the images and descriptions of her brother Son-Son, Weems touches on issues of class. One photograph, simply titled *Son-Son* [Fig. 1.17], shows him standing with his hands on the back of a chair, while other family members move in a blur around him. Weems describes him in the caption as "a hard working man who believes that a man ain't a man if he can't provide for his family." She also quotes him, saying, "'America wouldn't be shit without the working man.'"

Yet, in another image, Weems tells an outlandish story involving her brother and father. *Dad and Son-Son* [Fig. 1.18], taken at almost the same moment as the portrait above, shows Son-Son standing in the same position but this time Myrlie, Weems's father, is clearly visible in the chair and posed as the respected elder surrounded by his son and other loved ones. Weems captions this picture with the following text:

> Hands down, Dad and Son-Son really love one another. But when they're drinking things have been known to get out of line, ya know. Well, the last time they were on "full," one thing led to another and before anyone knew what was happening, they'd both whipped out pistols and boom!! Fired on one another! When the smoke cleared there was daddy laying on the floor wounded and Son-Son standing over him holding his head crying, "Daddy, daddy, I'm sorry." Look, I'm telling you my folks get way crazy.[82]

The disconnect between the wild story and the calm, posed photograph undermines the idea of veracity of representation.

In another portrait of Myrlie, we see him still seated in the chair but this time his arms are wrapped around three kids. Weems pairs this with a portrait of her mother,

---

[82] *Carrie Mae Weems* (Washington, D.C.: National Museum of Women in the Arts, 1994), 41.

Carrie, seated on a bed doing a girl's hair. The two pictures are framed as a unit, together titled *Mom and Dad with grandkids* [Fig. 1.19], and captioned with the following story:

> Like my mother, my sisters and I all had children by the time we were sixteen or so. So momma and daddy have plenty of grandchildren. When they heard I was pregnant, daddy cried and momma seriously blew her top. Smokin' she stormed into my bedroom one night, and in a voice trembling with rage said, "What's this mess I hear about ya being pregnant, girl!!!?[" *sic*] Now ordinarily, I was humble in the face of momma's wrath. But being pregnant had me completely bent out of shape; evil. And with a coldness that shocked even me, retorted, "It ain't no mess." Out done and hurt she said, "You little fast negroes gonna drive me crazy! Get your behind out my face, for I kill ya!"

In this story, we read about a moment of Weems's self-empowerment, a time when she found a new voice inside of herself. Both *Dad and Son-Son* and *Mom and Dad with grandkids* undermine stereotypes—including the prejudices outlined in the Moynihan Report—without embracing patriarchy (as we saw with the Africobra artworks) or emphasizing wealth and prominence (like in late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century African American portraiture).

O'Grady says, "To name ourselves rather than be named we must first see ourselves."[83] As a reaction against their invisibility and society's systemic erasure of them from culture, African Americans have turned to picturing themselves, and photographic portraiture and the family album have become political spaces. In addition, black feminists share their own experiences as a means of combatting this invisibility. With *Family Pictures and Stories*, Weems builds on the representational space of photographic portraiture and family albums by incorporating the black feminist tool of autobiography-as-ethnography. With the narrative elements of recollection, the

[83] O'Grady, "Olympia's Maid," 176.

series illuminates the construction of identity within the broader cultural context. Consequently, this series deconstructs social power structures by rejecting passivity and invisibility.

2

Signifyin' in *Ain't Jokin'* and *Colored People*

At first glance, *Ain't Jokin'* and *Colored People*—Carrie Mae Weems's two phototextual series from the late 1980s—bear little resemblance to each other. While they both combine portraits of African Americans with captions, their visual and emotional tones differ. *Ain't Jokin'* [Fig. 2.1]—made in 1987-88, immediately following her studies at UC Berkeley's Graduate Program in Folklore—includes eleven black-and-white, square-format photographs paired with racially-charged jokes or captions. All eleven photographs place text under the image, and nearly half of them are question-and-answer jokes with text outside the frame.[1] In the latter, the questions remain under the image and inside the frame, yet the answers are on the adjacent wall along with the other, informative wall texts, either pasted there directly or printed on covered plaques where the viewer must move a panel to reveal the answer.[2] The images and texts of *Ain't Jokin'* work together in a blunt examination of race relations and power in the United States.

[1] How the text is incorporated into the works varies. Some have it printed on the mat while others have it printed directly onto the photopaper. The five question-and-answer works in the series are *What are three things you can't give a black person?*, *What's a cross between an ape and a nigger?*, *What did Lincoln say after a drinking bout?*, *What's black on the inside, yellow on the outside and looks funny going off a cliff?*, *How do you get a nigger out of a tree?*.

[2] The institution showing the work decides how to display the answer texts; however, the artist prefers the active nature of the covered plaque, and as such I treat that as the primary form in my discussion of the series. Additionally, the mechanism of this panel varies with the different exhibitions: in the National Museum of Women in the Arts retrospective (1993), the viewer had to slide the panel to reveal the answer, and for the Frist retrospective (2012), the panel must be lifted. Weems, in conversation with the author, January 18, 2017.

In contrast, *Colored People* (1989) [Fig. 2.2] is made up of triptychs of brightly-colored images of black children; each object contains a single photograph repeated three times in separate frames. The frames and mats are black, and words are pasted onto them in an all-caps, medium-gray typeface. The photographs themselves are silver gelatin prints toned with jewel colors that correspond with the titles and words of the image, like magenta or deep blue. The series playfully takes on color and blackness with its literal black frames and labels. The title, text, and tinting all help to conflate "color" and black(ness). Adrienne Edwards says that these images "are not color photographs, but *colored* photographs, meaning the pigment is not reproduced but rather imbues, envelopes, and pervades the images in hues of luminescent violet, azure, sepia, and citrine."[3] But they are also colored pictures in the sociocultural sense, pictures that showcase non-Europeans and make you think about what it means to be labeled as other.

Yet, despite their formal differences, each series interrogates the relationship between race and power. The artist's potent combination of image and text articulates the visual and verbal manifestations of American racism. These confrontational series call the viewer's integrity into question, forcing him to examine his own prejudice.

Despite the fact that both series deal with the racist labels, associations, and stereotypes that mark the cultural ideas surrounding blackness, they are not often considered together. In fact, their subject matter and formal differences have led to vastly different critical receptions, with *Ain't Jokin'* surrounded by debate and *Colored*

[3] Adrienne Edwards, "Carrie Mae Weems," *Aperture*, no. 221 (Winter 2015): 103. Emphasis in the original.

People seen as "endearing."[4] I argue, however, that when contemplated side-by-side, their structural similarities—particularly the relationship between image and text and the use of duplication as a means of subversion—demonstrate how they confront the viewer's integrity and prejudice. Furthermore, this act of repetition and modification is not confined to Weems's practice. Rather, it is a form that runs throughout black literary and artistic productions. Different writers have used different terms: for Zora Neale Hurston, it is lying; for Gates, it is Signifyin(g), for Kevin Young, it is storying.[5] Yet, despite these different names, this practice boils down to a basic strategic maneuver: repetition working hand-in-hand with revision.

In this chapter, I discuss signifyin' and its use across black creative endeavors and then apply that to Weems's work. I argue that both *Ain't Jokin'* and *Colored People* demonstrate how white supremacy shapes American culture. Even though *Colored People* might be seen as "tender" and "endearing," at its core it deals with the same prejudice and hatred as the more controversial *Ain't Jokin'*. Furthermore, I argue that these series both do so by the distinctly black practice of signifyin'.

Signifyin' as Black Form

> *Repetition and revision are fundamental to black artistic forms, from painting and sculpture to music and language use. I decided to analyze the nature and function of Signifyin(g) precisely because it is repetition and revision, or repetition with a signal difference. Whatever is black*

---

[4] Miller-Keller, 7.

[5] Throughout this chapter I use the term signifyin'. See Zora Neale Hurston, "Mules and Men," in *Folklore, Memoirs, and Other Writings* (New York: The Library of America, 1995), 13–14; Kevin Young, *The Grey Album: On the Blackness of Blackness* (Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2012), 17; Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 48–50.

> *about black American culture is to be found in this identifiable black Signifyin(g) difference.* ~ Henry Louis Gates, Jr.[6]

Ain't Jokin' and *Colored People* both signify, a quintessentially black form, when they repeat and revise racial jokes, labels, and associations. As Gates explains, repetition with a signal difference is the foundational element of black creativity. It is the "trope of tropes" for African American literature: the paradigm through which we can analyze cultural objects like Weems's artworks, one that is composed of many rhetorical devices, but "always includes formal revision and an intertextual relation."[7]

Scholars of black culture have returned to this idea of imitation and revision again and again, a testimony to its extensive influence. Young describes signifyin'—which he (re)names storying, lying, improvising, jazzing, and more—as a kind of inverting and/or subverting that happens across black vernacular and artistic practices. Calling them "black codes," he tells his readers,

> To me, then, *storying* is both a tradition and a form: it is what links artfulness as diverse as a solo by Louis Armstrong—which, as any jazz-head will tell you, brilliantly tells a story—with any of the number of stories (or tall tales or "lies" or literature) black folks tell among and about themselves. Storying connects African American "story quilts" with the animal tales and spirituals that provided a code for runaway slaves…. I'm interested in the ways the fabric of black life has often meant its very fabrication, making a way out of no way, and making it up as you go along.[8]

Signifyin' then is an alchemical act. It changes something from one thing to another. Furthermore, it is a coded language, often misunderstood by outsiders, and this very confusion is part of its power.

---

[6] Gates, *The Signifying Monkey*, xxiv.

[7] Gates, *The Signifying Monkey*, 51–52. Some of the subtropes of Signifyin' include naming, stylin', rapping, sounding, and testifying.

[8] Young, 17.

For some (specifically those who are not black), signifyin' seems like mere imitation. However, such a view fails to acknowledge the change and parody at work in it. Hurston tells us that African Americans use mimicry to make something original.[9] A classic example of this is the nineteenth-century dance craze called the cakewalk. Invented by slaves on Southern plantations, the original dance mockingly copied the mannered walk and gestures of white masters and mistresses. The masters—seemingly ignorant that they were the butt of the joke—found the attempt at white manners amusing and copied the copy: whites imitating blacks who were themselves mocking whites initially.[10]

The cakewalk shows us that originality, in the context of signifyin', often means modifying something already in existence rather than producing something entirely new. Hurston argues,

> So if we look at it squarely, the Negro is a very original being. While he lives and moves in the midst of a white civilization, everything that he touches is reinterpreted for his own use. He has modified the language, mode of food preparation, practice of medicine, and most certainly the religion of his new country just as he adapted to suit himself the [fashions of the day].[11]

This reinterpretation of things is a form of resistance. Instead of conforming, African Americans have adapted everything from manners to food as a means of survival. When Weems repeats and then modifies jokes and stereotypes with her photographs, as she

---

[9]Zora Neale Hurston, "Characteristics of Negro Expression," in *Negro: An Anthology*, ed. Nancy Cunard (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1970), 28.

[10] Young, 79.

[11] Hurston, "Characteristics of Negro Expression," 28. Here Hurston points toward the then-famous "Sheik" hairstyle of Rudolph Valentino, a silent film star and the original Latin Lover whose most famous movie was *The Sheik* in which he played an Arab prince. The Sheik was a slick and highly pomaded hairstyle that became fashionable in the early twentieth century.

does in *Ain't Jokin'* and *Colored People*, it is a form of resistance to American culture's pervasive racism.

Repetition can be a way to playfully subvert the illogic of racism. By playing with white notions of blackness, it is a double signification. The humor or irony of signifyin' depends on instability and double entendre.[12] In African American literature and folklore, the figures of this double play include the Signifying Monkey and Tar Baby. Both figures originated from the oral stories of enslaved African Americans: with Tar Baby made famous by the Uncle Remus collection, and the Signifying Monkey appearing throughout twentieth-century black music, including songs by Cab Calloway, Little Willie Dixon, and Oscar Brown.[13] The Signifying Monkey is a trickster figure who is in itself a form of signifyin'. As Gates argues,

> The ironic reversal of a received racist image of the black as simianlike, the Signifying Monkey, he who dwells at the margins of discourse, ever punning, ever troping, ever embodying the ambiguities of language, is our trope for repetition and revision, indeed our trope of chiasmus, repeating and reversing simultaneously as he does in one deft discursive act.[14]

From the stories of the Signifying Monkey and Tar Baby to the abolitionist slave narratives, African Americans have used doubling or repetition to "make a way out of no

---

[12] Michael D. Harris, *Colored Pictures: Race and Visual Representation* (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 6.

[13] Gates, *The Signifying Monkey*, 51–52. In the Uncle Remus stories (which were published in the late nineteenth century by a white man named Joel Chandler Harris), Tar Baby is a doll who is made by Br'er Fox to trap Br'er Rabbit. Br'er Rabbit gets angry when Tar Baby does not respond to him and hits him. Because the doll is made of tar, the more Br'er Rabbit fights, the more he becomes trapped by Tar Baby.

[14] Gates, *The Signifying Monkey*, 52.

way."[15] As the writings of Gates, Hurston, and Young show us, repetition with a signal difference is a widespread practice across black creative productions. Therefore, with *Ain't Jokin'* and *Colored People,* Weems joins the long line of black folks who use signifyin' to make new ways of visualizing and understanding the power structures of difference.

As an important subtype of signifyin', reversal is often used as a way of modifying something and to create a new meaning. Photography, and photographic portraiture in particular, can be an important tool in that endeavor.[16] In a classic example of photographic reversal, Sojourner Truth—only twenty-five years after the invention of photography—used her *carte-de-visite* and cabinet card fundraising campaign to assert her humanity and advocate for the abolitionist cause [Fig. 2.3].[17] Beginning in 1864, Truth inscribed the words "I sell the Shadow to support the Substance" under her image

[15] Make a way out of no way is an African American idiom, borrowed here from Young, 17.

[16] For more on the history of African American portraiture and photography, see Maurice O. Wallace and Shawn Michelle Smith, eds., *Pictures and Progress: Early Photography and the Making of African American Identity* (Duke University Press, 2012); and Deborah Willis, ed., *Picturing Us: African American Identity in Photography* (New York: New Press, 1994).

[17] *Cartes-de-visite* and cabinet cards were popular types of photographs in the nineteenth century. Both were made of albumen prints mounted on a card made of thicker paper. *Cartes-de-visite* were popular from their invention in the mid-1850s until they were supplanted by the larger cabinet cards. The term "cardomania" was used to describe the popularity of collecting and trading these cards. People accumulated cards of friends, family, and historical figures such as Truth. See Beaumont Newhall, *The History of Photography: From 1839 to the Present* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1982), 60–8; and Elizabeth Anne McCauley, *A. A. E. Disdéri and the Carte de Visite Portrait Photograph* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1985).

and sold it to her admirers and fellow abolitionists.[18] In these words we find multiple levels of subversion, most obviously in the dichotomy between the intangible "Shadow" and the tangible "Substance." Shadow here refers to her image and the process of photography; the substance, in contrast, is the work of her body—her tours, lectures, and other activism for African Americans.[19] The selling of her image and words reverses the power dynamics at play in her status as a former slave. With these photographs, Truth controls the ability to sell herself—or rather sell the shadow of herself—instead of being at the whim of her former master. Truth made this connection herself when she was reported to have said that she "used to be sold for other people's benefit, but now she sold herself for her own."[20]

In addition to modifying via reversing, signifyin' also indicates a change in the relationship between the subtext and the text. In fact, it often means that the subtext has become the text. Take, for instance, the coded message of spirituals. As both Young and Hurston indicate above, such hymns demonstrate the adaptation of Christianity to the African American context. They are full of language that echoes the ancient Hebraic

---

[18] Truth sold photographic portraits of herself from 1863 until her death in 1883. See Teresa Zackodnik, "The 'Green-Backs of Civilization': Sojourner Truth and Portrait Photography," *American Studies* 46, no. 2 (Summer 2005): 118.

[19] Photography, as the name asserts, is a sort of drawing with light. Early photography buffs were keenly aware of this and made references to it frequently in their analyses of this new technology: Henry Fox Talbot titled his mid-1840s book (the earliest publication to use photographic illustrations) *The Pencil of Nature*; the Boston daguerreotype firm Southworth & Hawes advertised their services in 1848 with a cartoon featuring the sun as a painter, and Charles Baudelaire titled his famous 1863 *Atlantic Monthly* essay "Doings of the Sunbeam." Consequently, Truth's audience would have quickly and easily understood the idea of shadow as a reference to photography.

[20] *New York World,* May 13, 1870. As quoted by Carleton Mabee, *Sojourner Truth: Slave, Prophet, Legend* (New York and London: New York University Press, 1993), 216.

experience of exile, liberation, and the search for the Promised Land. Whites and others historically mistook the lyrics about Egypt, Canaan, and the River Jordan quite literally as references to the Biblical stories. In doing so, they ignored completely the marked connections between the ancient Hebrews and African American slaves as two peoples held in bondage in a foreign land hoping for a new and different life. The popular spiritual *Go Down Moses* clearly suggests this connection with the lyrics of its refrain and the first verse:

> Go down, Moses,
> Way down in Egypt land,
> Tell Old Pharaoh,
> Let my people go,
>
> When Israel was in Egypt's land:
> Let my people go,
> Oppressed so hard they could not stand,
> Let my people go.[21]

Go Down Moses is a cry for freedom wrapped in religious language, a coded message where the subtext is the true text: the connection of the Israelites'/African Americans' movement from slavery "down" in Egypt/the South to freedom "up" in the Promised Land/the North is hidden in plain sight.[22]

Weems uses the devices of signifyin'—like doubling, reversal, and subtext-as-text—in her work to examine the state and consequences of power and identity. In fact, the very nature of this black trope undermines power by taking something and flipping

[21] Alfred Taylor et al., *Go down Moses*, 1914, audio recording, https://www.loc.gov/item/jukebox.78/.

[22] Henry Louis Gates, Jr., "Dis and Dat: Dialect and the Descent," in *Figures in Black: Words, Signs, and the "Racial" Self* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 191–92.

it. That she signifies on these harmful expressions of blackness is a fundamental part of the work.

Ain't Jokin'

> *When confronted, (that's what images do, confront), with questions of racism we sense our own integrity called into question. The fact is there are more racists disguised as non-racists than you can shake a stick at; so our integrity needs calling into question, if only to make sure we have any at all.* ~ Carrie Mae Weems[23]

In the early 1990s, *Ain't Jokin'* sparked controversy at multiple installations of "No Laughing Matter," an exhibition curated by Nina Felshin, which examined humor in contemporary art.[24] At Dalhousie University in Nova Scotia, Canada, and then Tufts University in Massachusetts, people protested the black and white photographs' blunt depictions of racism and racial jokes.[25] The Tufts's Tisch Gallery staff hoped to preempt

---

[23] From a statement by the artist printed in *Edict and Episode: Meaning and Image*, exhibition brochure (San Diego, Calif: Alternative Space Gallery, 1987). Reprinted in Robbin Legere Henderson et al., *Prisoners of Image: Ethnic and Gender Stereotypes* (New York: The Alternative Museum, 1989) and in Miller-Keller, Wilson, and Weems, *Matrix 115*.

[24] "No Laughing Matter" toured North America from 1991-1993. It appeared at the following venues: University Gallery, The University of North Texas (Denton, Texas, October-November 1991); Illingworth Kerr Gallery, Alberta College of Art & Design (Calgary, Alberta, January 1992); Dalhousie Art Gallery, Dalhousie University (Halifax, Nova Scotia, March-April 1992); and Tisch Gallery, Tufts University (Medford, Massachusetts, April 1993).

[25] People protested the exhibition and *Ain't Jokin'* at Dalhousie University in Halifax, Nova Scotia, and Tufts University in Medford, Massachusetts. However, the Dalhousie protests were small compared to the protracted event at Tufts. See Zan Dubin, "Censorship in Arts: Alive and Well : Jock Reynolds, Director of the Addison Gallery, Brings an Exhibit to Newport Harbor Museum and Recounts His Involvement in the Mapplethorpe Affair.," *Los Angeles Times*, March 9, 1993, http://articles.latimes.com/1993-03-09/entertainment/ca-1133_1_newport-harbor-art-museum.

the issues that manifested at Dalhousie, but their anticipation of controversy created even more.[26] To enlist help with programming on the challenging nature of *Ain't Jokin',* Elizabeth Wylie, the gallery curator, met with members of the black faculty caucus. The faculty members, however, feared that the work would upset and traumatize students of color. They proposed that the gallery remove Weems's art altogether from its installation of the exhibition, even though she was the only artist of color represented. The black faculty caucus so adamantly believed in excluding *Ain't Jokin'* that they took their objections to Tufts's administration.

After several meetings with a broad range of faculty and staff, the university hired outside consultant Marilyn Richardson to manage the installation of Weems's work, with disappointing results. Weems's work was placed in a small room with large (some nearly life-sized) photographs of the artist, her biographical information, and various quotes from her, most of which did not relate to *Ain't Jokin'* at all.[27] It also included a looped video that featured Marlon Riggs's film *Ethnic Notions* (1986) and a round table discussion of the exhibition from university members.[28]

After the exhibition closed, black faculty members presented their concerns in a statement printed in *The Tufts Daily*. There, they explained that they took issue with the "seeming indifference to the psychological, social and educational consequences of the

[26] Elizabeth Wylie, former curator and director of the Tufts University Art Gallery, in conversation with the author, July 1, 2016. Much of the following recollection of events comes from this conversation.

[27] Wylie, in conversation with the author, July 1, 2016.

[28] Christi Beebe, "Social Responsibility Art Exhibit Scheduled to Open This Thursday," *The Tufts Daily*, March 31, 1993.

exhibit," rather than Weems's work in particular.[29] Additionally, they expressed support and approval for the consultant's work to contextualize Weems's series. Yet, the decision to isolate *Ain't Jokin'* and focus on the artist instead of the work backfired with the students. At the opening panel discussion that included Barry Gaither, Jock Sturges, and Helaine Posner, black students expressed dismay over the segregation, with one student asking, "Why are we still at the back of the bus?"[30]

Ain't Jokin' is confrontational. It purposely makes viewers uneasy by challenging racial stereotypes with blunt imagery and text. Weems laid out her thinking behind the series in a statement from a 1987 installation at San Diego's Alternative Space Gallery:

> The photographs included here are taken from a series, *Ain't Jokin'*, which deals exclusively with the stereotyping of Afro-Americans by whites. Black or White, when dealing with the question of racism, we get ta itchin' under our skin, our temperatures rise, our lips quiver; still the major problem of the twentieth century is that of the color line. Personally I'm neurotic, a tad paranoid even, about this color business. We all are. When confronted, (that's what images do, confront), with questions of racism we sense our own integrity called into question. The fact is there are more racists disguised as non-racists than you can shake a stick at; so our integrity needs calling into question, if only to make sure we have any at all. Each of us carries around little packages of consumer racism in the form of little neat 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 [— *sic*] effects on the material well-being of those singled out as objects of these expressions. It is the greatest irony that the same negative stereotypes used to keep Blacks rooted to work in the past, are the same ones which keep them out of work today.

---

[29] "Statement from Black Faculty at Tufts," *The Tufts Daily*, April 20, 1993. The statement was signed by the following faculty members: Paula Aymer (Sociology), Daniel Brown (German), Linda Datcher-Loury (Economics), Gerald R. Gill (History), George Mitchell (Political Science), Pearl T. Robinson (Political Science), Mohamed Taleb-Khyar (Romance Languages), Clyde Taylor (English), Dorice Wright (Education).

[30] Wylie, in conversation with the author, 2016. Panelists at the event included Jock Reynolds (former Washington Project for the Arts director), Edmond Barry Gaither (the director and curator for the National Center of Afro-American Artists in Boston), and Helaine Posner (then curator of the List Visual Art Center at Massachusetts Institute of Technology).

> Folklore taps right at the core of these ugly little prevailing attitudes and is for this reason an excellent socio-psychological barometer. This piece uses folkloric jokes, childhood verses, various mental associations to confront and/or challenge and/or undercut these vogue, but vulgar stereotypes of the Black. For immediacy, the stereotypes are presented photographically in broad exaggeration, and this way assists viewers through the process of self-reflection.[31]

Ain't Jokin' is a stimulus for soul-searching about race (particularly for white liberals who feel their integrity questioned when confronted with prejudice). Viewers often feel personally confronted by these images, and that makes them nervous. Weems explicitly states that the series deals with white racism against black people and the real effects it has on African Americans. It is those material consequences that led the black faculty caucus at Tufts to protest the work in a misguided attempt to protect their students.

Interestingly, the incident at Tufts is not the only one where African Americans have protested the work. Bridget Cooks recalls an incident at Rhode Island School of Design (RISD) where, after seeing the series hanging in the gallery space, the black custodial staff went on strike.[32] Previously unaware that Weems is also black, most of the strikers returned to work once they learned of the artist's race. Cooks says,

> This incident raises the question of how knowledge of the artist's racial and gender identity may change the reception of the work. How do these ethnic jokes work differently in a gallery space than when they are yelled at someone on the street or

---

[31] From a statement by the artist printed in *Edict and Episode: Meaning and Image*, exhibition brochure (San Diego, Calif: Alternative Space Gallery, 1987). Reprinted in Robbin Legere Henderson et al., *Prisoners of Image: Ethnic and Gender Stereotypes* (New York: The Alternative Museum, 1989) and in Miller-Keller, Wilson, and Weems, *Matrix 115*.

[32] Bridget R. Cooks, "See Me Now," *Camera Obscura*, no. 36 (September 1995): 75. In addition to these, Weems recalls another incident when shipping her work to the European Union for an exhibition. Customs officials rejected the work and would not allow it to enter the country because of its defamatory nature. Only after Weems explained that she herself was black did they allow the works to go through. Weems, in conversation with the author, January 18, 2017.

> overheard at a party? Why is this spectacle recreated as a way to discuss relations of social power? Whom is this work for?[33]

These questions, when placed alongside Weems's 1987 statement, frame my exploration of the series here. I argue that Weems uses the harsh relationship of the images and captions and the unexpected setting of the art gallery to undermine, as she says in the above statement, the "vogue, but vulgar stereotypes" of African Americans. Furthermore, she does it by signifyin'. Instead of simply repeating the jokes, she revises them and reworks their meaning to invite the viewer into a space of personal reflection.

The subject matter of *Ain't Jokin'* stems from Weems's time studying at UC Berkeley under prominent folklorist Alan Dundes. She was enrolled in the program from 1984-1987 during which time Dundes's research centered around ethnic jokes and stereotypes.[34] Dundes treated jokes as a form of oral folklore, and just as Weems described in the statement above he believed that folklore is a way to gauge social and psychological values and beliefs. He explains:

> As a folklorist, I have come to believe that no piece of folklore continues to be transmitted *unless* it means something—even if neither the speaker nor the audience can articulate what that meaning might be. In fact, it usually is essential that the joke's meaning *not* be crystal clear. If people knew what they were communicating when they told jokes, the jokes would cease to be effective as socially sanctioned outlets for expressing taboo ideas and subjects. Where there is anxiety, there will be jokes to express that anxiety.[35]

Ain't Jokin' takes this anxiety seriously. For black viewers, it is a reminder that society has institutionalized and formalized hatred of you and those who share your skin color.

---

[33] Cooks, 75. Cooks states that one custodian quit after learning about Weems's race.

[34] Dundes's book *Cracking Jokes: Studies of Sick Humor Cycles and Stereotypes* was published in 1987. See Alan Dundes, *Cracking Jokes: Studies of Sick Humor Cycles and Stereotypes* (Berkeley: Ten Speed Press, 1987). Italics in the original.

[35] Dundes, vi.

For others, it calls into question your integrity and your sense of your good nature. Even the title—Ain't *Jokin'*—refutes the idea that these jokes, rhymes, and mental associations can be dismissed as harmless. As Dundes writes in *Cracking Jokes*, "Remember, people joke about only what is most serious. That is why there are so many jokes about death and ethnic stereotypes."[36]

Stereotypes are part of how we separate the world into self and not-self.[37] They are a means to find order and structure where there is none. The fact that stereotyping is often built on little to no concrete evidence and thus divorced from reality, coupled with the knowledge that we all do it, multiplies the harm created from it. Stereotypes take on a life of their own, spurred on by our desire for control.[38] These are the conditions that lead to the racist imagery and associations that Weems challenges in *Ain't Jokin'*.

Two of her most direct confrontations in the series deal with the tropes that yoke African Americans with certain foods. *Black Man Holding Watermelon* [Fig. 2.4] and *Black Woman With Chicken* [Fig. 2.5]—though not a diptych exactly—use the same format and are often hung side-by-side. Each object joins a square-format, black-and-white photograph with its title printed on the bottom of the photo paper. *Black Man Holding Watermelon* shows a young African American man dressed in a white t-shirt, vest, and jeans and with a flattop haircut. He stands in front of a white background and holds a large watermelon in both hands as if it is a platter presented to the viewer, while *Black Woman With Chicken* likewise shows a casually-dressed young black woman

---

[36] Dundes, vii.

[37] Sander L. Gilman, *Difference and Pathology: Stereotypes of Sexuality, Race, and Madness* (Cornell University Press, 1985), 17.

[38] Gilman, 12.

sitting at a restaurant booth and holding a fried chicken drumstick. Each figure stares at the camera, as if they are looking directly at the viewer.

Both image and text work to color your understanding of the other. When discussing *Black Woman with Chicken*, Andrea Kirsch says,

> The woman is young and comely, so the fried chicken leg she holds is as jarring as the text below. … [W]ords which, on their own, have a strongly derogatory connotation. This is the wrong label, we think, or the wrong picture. Or is it the right label, that is, the conventional label, and didn't we, who labeled her, get it wrong?[39]

Indeed, the text combined with the chicken leg prop heightens the discomfort of the viewer. Viewers do not expect to see this image and this text in a gallery space.

The racialization of food—in particular chicken and watermelon—goes back to nineteenth- and early twentieth-century advertisements and ephemera. In one example, an Alden Fruit Vinegar trade card (c.1880s) [Fig. 2.6] shows an older black man caught in the act of stealing two chickens by a white man with a gun. A watermelon and some apples lie on the ground in front of the old man.[40] His face contorts with fright as the white man stares blankly. The black man in this card has stereotypically exaggerated physical features: big and red lips, wool-like hair, and a large nose. These elements are typical images of a comic or happy "darky," a stereotyped figure frequently found in

---

[39] Andrea Kirsch, "Carrie Mae Weems: Issues in Black, White and Color," in *Carrie Mae Weems* (Washington, D.C.: National Museum of Women in the Arts, 1994), 13.

[40] While they may be a less potent symbol of bigotry today, apples were also pictured as desirable objects from turn-of-the-century country thieves. William Woys Weaver, "The Dark Side of Culinary Ephemera: The Portrayal of African Americans," *Gastronomica: The Journal of Food and Culture* 6, no. 3 (August 1, 2006): 76.

minstrel shows and culinary ephemera whose exaggerated features, thievery, and laziness promote racist ideology.[41]

Patricia A. Turner argues that the numerous pairings of African Americans with watermelons has two messages: one, that black people like to eat with their hands, and two, that they are well nourished with accessible and proliferating crops grown in American (especially Southern) soil.[42] To eat with your hands signals a less-civilized, more primitive mode of being. The latter idea was often reinforced with images of smiling black children. A photograph by F. W. Guerin from St. Louis (c.1902) [Fig. 2.7], shows something similar. In this picture, we see three boys sitting by a fence eating large pieces of watermelon. Though the photograph was made in a studio, the scene gives the impression of an isolated country setting, and the three boys smile with delight. Like other images of comic darkies, this one promotes the idea of the happy and poor black child.[43] A halftone print from a 1913 periodical called *Little Rastus's idea of Grandpa in Heaven* [Fig. 2.8] further underscores the notion that African Americans were only concerned with the simple pleasures in life like sweet fruit. Heaven, it argues, for black Americans means sitting on a floating slice of watermelon, playing a banjo, and melons and meats flying about.[44]

---

[41] Weaver, 76.

[42] Patricia A. Turner, *Ceramic Uncles & Celluoid Mammies: Black Images and Their Influence on Culture* (New York: Anchor Books, 1994), 15.

[43] For more information on the origin of the pickaninny character in American culture and its ties to both sides of the "slavery question" see Turner, *Ceramic Uncles & Celluoid Mammies: Black Images and Their Influence on Culture*.

[44] Many scholars have delved into the connection between culinary history and stereotypes of African Americans. For more information, see Weaver, "The Dark Side of Culinary Ephemera," and Turner, *Ceramic Uncles & Celluloid Mammies*. For a short, but insightful, look at Weems's use of the culinary, see Vivian Patterson, "Carrie Mae

Weems's photograph, in contrast, shows the black man with a watermelon and a straight face. He is young, well dressed, and stoic. Instead of finding paradise, the man in Weems's image looks annoyed. He purses his lips and looks up with his eyes as if to say, "A watermelon, really?" Similarly, the young woman's expression and body language signal rejection; she even physically blocks her mouth with her other hand. Both young people look like they are sick and tired of the connotations that come with the watermelon and chicken. Weems's revisions to the watermelon and chicken stereotypes—including the contemporary fashion and facial expressions of the man and woman—foregrounds the real consequences and continuing influence of these racist ideas and images. Weems here re-images the hateful cultural associations so that the relationship between the real and the metaphorical are brought to the foreground. Her redoing of the stereotype undercuts it and rejects the idea that it is natural.

Shortly after finishing *Ain't Jokin'*, Weems made another work that used a similar tactic of replication in order to undo stereotypes in collaboration with the artists' collective Group Material. Produced as a part of *Inserts*, a booklet distributed with the Sunday, May 22, 1988, edition of the *New York Times*, Weems's work explored the stereotypes of black women. It appeared across from Barbara Kruger's *We Don't Need Another Hero*, along with other work by Mike Glier, Jenny Holzer, Felix Gonzalez-Torres, Nancy Spero, Nancy Linn, Hans Haacke, Richard Prince, and Louise Lawler [Fig. 2.9].

In *Peaches, Liz, Tanikka, and Elaine* [Fig. 2.10], Weems embodies five archetypes of African American women, ranging from Black Panther to leopard-wearing

---

Weems Serves Up Substance," *Gastronomica: The Journal of Food and Culture* 1, no. 4 (Fall 2001): 21–24.

fashionista. *Elaine*, the woman on the far left, channels Elaine Brown, the former Black Panther with her leather jacket, black beret, and raised fist. To her right is *Tanikka*, who wears an Afrocentric dress, wraps her hair in a turban, and holds her head with pride. *Peaches,* the third woman, is the scantily-clad fashionista with a bandeau top and large Afro. And finally *Liz*, at the far right, is a middle-aged woman whose patterned dress and pearls signify a semblance of respectability despite the strange expression on her face and her off-kilter blonde wig.[45] Underneath these four photographs, Weems places a long text that describes the emotional response stemming from her realization of the construction of black female identity. She states,

> 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 any other 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.[46]

By pairing the images with this text, Weems articulates how the accepted images of African American women rely on a fictional apparatus that does not connect with the real, lived experiences of them.

As with *Ain't Jokin'*, Weems's work in *Inserts* was called out for its use of racial stereotypes. Group Material first intended to circulate the booklet in the *Daily News*. However, they rejected it shortly before its printing. The *Times* attempted to censor

---

[45] Deborah Willis, "Photographing between the Lines: Beauty, Politics, and the Poetic Vision of Carrie Mae Weems," in *Carrie Mae Weems: Thirty Years of Photography and Video*, ed. Kathryn E. Delmez (New Haven and London: Frist Center for the Visual Arts in association with Yale University Press, 2012), 35.

[46] Artist's statement, 1988, in Deborah Willis and Carla Williams, *The Black Female Body: A Photographic History* (Philadelphia: Temple: University Press, 2002), 190.

Weems's work in particular, asking her to remove from her text the word "pickaninny," which they believed would upset and confuse their readers. She refused, and they agreed to publish it unaltered.[47]

Art historian Deborah Willis argues that *Peaches, Liz, Tanikka, and Elaine* is a riff on Nina Simone's 1960s song *Four Women*,[48] where the singer describes the appearance and personality of four black women named Aunt Sarah, Saffronia, Sweet Thing, and Peaches; however, I believe that it also can be seen as a play on Hortense Spillers's 1987 essay "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book." Spillers begins the article by saying,

> Let's face it. I am a marked woman, but not everybody knows my name. 'Peaches' and 'Brown Sugar,' 'Sapphire' and 'Earth Mother' 'Aunty,' 'Granny,' God's 'Holy Fool,' a 'Miss Ebony First,' or 'Black Woman at the Podium': I describe a locus of confounded identities, a meeting ground of investments and privations in the national treasury of rhetorical wealth. My country needs me and if I were not here, I would have been invented.[49]

Spillers argues that black women take on identities that are defined in myriad ways by the stereotypes or controlling images that surround them. They are the "embodiment of difference," as Weems says in her caption, neither fully inhabiting blackness nor femininity because they are the *other* Other, a fiction constructed through culture's enduring images of them.

---

[47] Julie Ault, ed., *Show and Tell: A Chronicle of Group Material* (London: Four Corners Books, 2010), 133. Interestingly, Ault spends most of her (very) short discussion on *Inserts* on this attempted censorship, but does not reproduce Weems's work in her book. Instead, she shows the pages by Mike Glier, Jenny Holzer, Richard Prince, and Louise Lawler, along with a map by the *Times* showing where in Manhattan the booklet was distributed.

[48] Willis, "Photographing between the Lines," 35.

[49] Hortense J. Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," *Diacritics* 17, no. 2 (Summer 1987): 65.

While *Peaches, Black Man,* and *Black Woman* play with the mental association of African American stereotypes, others take on racist jokes themselves. Take for example, *What's a cross between an ape and a nigger?* [Fig. 2.11]. This work uses two images—often framed separately and hung beside each other—of head-and-shoulder portraits of a black man in profile and a gorilla in three-quarter view. Weems locates most of the question under the gorilla image and leaves the last, derogatory word alone under the picture of the black man. On the wall by the photographs, a moveable plaque strategically conceals the answer to the joke and forces the viewer to take an active role [Fig. 2.12]. Once you lift up or push aside the red "answer" panel, then you can read the horrible response: "A mentally retarded ape."

The physical action on the part of the viewer is critical. The participation of the viewer changes the force of the series, and as such is a crucial element to it.[50] By making the format of the question-and-answer interactive, Weems directly implicates the viewer in the joke's racism. Either you participate by lifting the panel to find the answer, or you avoid moving it, likely because you already know or can guess at the answer. You are implicated in the hateful message by either your actions or your knowledge.

Weems pushes the active role of the viewer further with her objects that address racial violence. *What's black on the inside, yellow on the outside, and looks funny going over a cliff?* [Fig. 2.13] uses an appropriated photograph that shows a mob of young white boys shouting and holding protest signs and Confederate battle flags.[51] The image

[50] Weems, in conversation with the author, January 18, 2017.

[51] What we commonly refer to today as the "Confederate Flag" was never the official flag of the Confederate States of America. Rather, it was the flag used on the battlefield for several Confederate units, including those commanded by General Robert E. Lee.

is a news photograph made by Flip Schulke, a photojournalist known for his work during the Civil Rights Era. A friend of Martin Luther King, Jr., he documented the protests from both sides, including the march in Selma and the protests in Montgomery after the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Educatio*n decision (from which this particular image comes).[52] *What's black* shows a crowd of twenty or so white high school students (mostly boys) protesting outside their high school. A few of the boys wave flags, and one holds a sign that says, "We want a white school." Like *Ape* above, *What's black* prints the joke's question under the image, while the answer is found on a moveable plaque outside the frame. This time the answer is, "a bus full of niggers." The *Ain't Jokin'* version revises the photojournalistic image with the addition of the crass joke—something more likely to have been said among the crowd than as the original newspaper caption. Consequently, lifting the panel to reveal the answer connects us with the angry, racist crowd rather than the sober consumption of a news item.

From postcards as memorabilia of lynchings to *Jet's* publication of Emmett Till's open casket, photography plays an important role in the extrajudicial killing of black men and women.[53] In the 1980s, Weems was not the only photographer to examine this

---

[52] For more information on Flip Schulke and the Civil Rights Era, see Brisco Center for American History, "A Guide to the Flip Schulke Photographic Archive, circa 1947-2007," The University of Texas at Austin, and Henry Hampton, *Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Movement, 1954-1985*, American Experience (PBS and Blackside, 1987). http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/eyesontheprize/profiles/61_schools.html.

[53] The recent police killings of black people (including that of Alton Brown in Louisiana and Diamond Reynolds's live stream of Philando Castille's death in Minnesota) underscores the fundamental role of cameras—still images and video—in the documentation of racial violence. For more information on the historical phenomena of lynching photographs, see Leigh Raiford, "Ida B. Wells and the Shadow Archive," in *Pictures and Progress: Early Photography and the Making of African American Identity*, ed. Maurice O. Wallace and Shawn Michelle Smith (Duke University Press, 2012); and Leigh Raiford, "Photography and the Practices of Critical Black Memory,"

relationship between pictures and violence. Pat Ward Williams's best-known work *Accused: Blowtorch, Padlock* (1987) [Fig. 2.14] was made at the same time Weems was working on *Ain't Jokin'*. Here, Williams mounts a 1937 photograph from *Life* magazine, framed in a found window, onto tar paper that she filled with text written in her own hand. It reads:

> There's something going on here. I didn't see it right away. After all, you see one lynched man you've seen them all. He looks so helpless. He doesn't look lynched yet. What is that under his chin? How long has he been LOCKED to that tree? Can you be BLACK and look at this? Life magazine published this picture. Could Hitler show pics of the Holocaust to keep the JEWS in line? WHO took this picture? Couldn't he just as easily let the man go? Did he take his camera home and then come back with a blowtorch? Where do you TORTURE someone with a blowtorch BURN off an ear? Melt an eye? A screaming mouth. How can this photograph exist? WHO took this picture? Oh god. Somebody do something. Life answers—Page 141—no credit.

The text meanders around the window frame with its image and the enlarged detail shots. Williams's hand-written response is immediate, intimate, and visceral. Her text looks rushed—stream of consciousness, a mix of cursive and print, and all-caps to emphasize key words.[54] With questions like "Can you be BLACK and look at this?" or "WHO took this picture? Couldn't he just as easily let the man go?" she implicates the viewer—passive witnesses are not innocent bystanders.

Instead of exploring real, historical violence outright as in Williams's *Accused*, Lorna Simpson's 1989 artworks *Necklines* [Fig. 2.15] and *Untitled (Two Necklines)* [Fig. 2.16] imply violence with their fragmented photographs of a black woman. The former

---

History and Theory 48, no. 4 (2009): 112–29. For other art forms and the anti-lynching campaign of the twentieth century, see Helen Langa, "Two Antilynching Art Exhibitions: Politicized Viewpoints, Racial Perspectives, Gendered Constraints," *American Art* 13, no. 1 (Spring 1999): 11–39.

[54] Lisa E. Farrington, "Conceptualism, Politics, and the Art of African-American Women," *Source: Notes in the History of Art* 24, no. 4 (July 15, 2005): 71.

work is composed of five objects—three rectangular pictures of the woman's neckline and two plaques with neck-related words. The first plaque reads: necktie, neck & neck, neck-ed, neckless. And the second one lists: necking, neckline, necklace, breakneck. The three images get larger from left to right, almost as if we are zooming in to get a closer look. By ending the lists with "breakneck," Simpson leaves us with a whispered hint of violence and lynching. Just as Williams's text invites the viewer into the artist's mind and implicated the viewer as a witness to the crime, Simpson also involves the viewer with her final word and fragmented images of a black body.[55]

Simpson also hints towards violence with the latter work, *Untitled (Two Necklines)*. Here we have two nearly identical photographs of the same woman in the same, simple white shift as in *Necklines*. This time, however, the images are in circular frames and separated by a series of black plaques that list round things—ring, surround, lasso, noose, eye, areola, halo, cuffs, collar, loop—and a larger, red plaque that says, "feel the ground/sliding from under you." "Noose" is casually placed fourth down in the list, but that final red inscription—the only color in the work—makes the viewer imagine themselves as the victim. Weems, unlike Simpson and Williams, makes her viewer an active participant, not a passive witness.[56] When we have to move the panel to reveal the answer, we participate in the perpetuation of racial violence.

Another *Ain't Jokin'* work that evokes violence, *How do you get a nigger out of a tree?* [Fig. 2.17], uses a photograph made by the artist instead of the appropriated

---

[55] Farrington, 71.

[56] Both Williams's *Accused: Blowtorch, Padlock* and Simpson's *Untitled (Necklines)* appeared in the 1990 exhibition "The Decade Show: Frameworks of Identity in the 1980s" organized by the New Museum, the Studio Museum in Harlem, and the Museum of Contemporary Hispanic Art. There was no work by Weems in that show.

images of *What's black on the inside* and Williams's *Accused*. This photograph shows the head and shoulders of a young African American male with a thin rope that extends from his neck to the top edge of the picture. His head and shoulders lean forward so that you cannot see his face, only his ears and the side of his head. While the white collar of his shirt blocks our view of the rope around his neck, we can see that it is pulled taut with a knot over his nape and makes a vertical line toward the branches of the tree that frames the left side of the image. Light leaks through the spaces around the leaves at the top of the picture and blows out the detail and focus of the photograph, a soft and beautiful aspect of a horrible image. The paradoxical relationship between beauty and horror in *Tree* allows Weems to play with our perception of this racial violence, something that appropriating one of the many photographs of actual lynchings would not have allowed her to do. *Tree*, like the other works above, also forces the viewer out of the passive bystander role into one of an active participant by forcing us to seek out the answer (in this case, "Cut the noose").

Part of the anxiety or discomfort of the images is in the connection between beauty and horror and the association with mobs and bigots. But it also derives from our role as hearers of the joke—racism is personal. Sigmund Freud points out that a tendentious joke like the ones Weems uses in *Ain't Jokin'* generally requires three people: the person telling the joke, the person hearing and taking pleasure in the joke, and the person who is the object of the hostility.[57] We, as active participants, are in the

[57]Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1960), 118. Freud also asserts that tendentious jokes are most often used as a way to bring down powerful people like politicians, and that when directed toward someone in a less lofty position it is because there is something forbidden to say. Others have pointed to the frequent use of grotesque humor (such as blackface minstrelsy) to demonize outsiders and minorities. For more information on

position of either—or sometimes both—the person intended to take pleasure in the joke or to be the butt of it. Such explicit hate is unexpected and uncomfortable, particularly in the white cube of the contemporary art gallery. Interestingly, as the work's creator and an African American, Weems occupies two of the other positions Freud outlines: she is both the joke teller and the subject of its vitriol. This dual position is partly responsible for the confusion and protest that surround the series, as evidenced by the custodial strike at RISD. This difficulty in sorting out our and the artist's positions in *Ain't Jokin'* is part of how it works. Weems inverts and subverts the expected roles of those positions: instead of a white person telling the racist joke a black woman does, and instead of the black person being the passive object she is an active participant.

Ain't Jokin' has been surrounded by misunderstanding and controversy from the start. Indeed, controversy and discomfort are some of its critical elements. Weems tells us from the start, "that's what images do, confront."[58] Thus when the custodial staff walks out, students protest outside the museum, or faculty try to censor it, *Ain't Jokin'* obviously has succeeded in pushing boundaries and forcing us out of our comfort zone. The racist stereotypes of black people with chicken and watermelon are not supposed to evoke feelings of tenderness. They are rightfully ugly things. But Weems importantly does not simply repeat them to demonstrate how ugly and horrible they are. Instead, she signifies on them to make us face the material consequences of these hateful images.

---

this use of humor, see Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (London: Methuen, 1986); Kobena Mercer, "Carnivalesque and Grotesque: What Bakhtin's Laughter Tells Us about Art and Culture," in *No Laughing Matter: Visual Humor in Ideas of Race, Nationality, and Ethnicity*, ed. Angela Rosenthal (Hanover, NH: Dartmouth College Press, 2016), 1–19.

[58] Miller-Keller, 7.

Colored People

> *I remember the very day I became colored.* ~ Zora Neale Hurston[59]
>
> *I'm feeling extremely colored now days, and I'm happy about my "conditions." For much too long, I've placed great emphasis on being European and Western. Often at the expense of overlooking the value of Afro-American culture, I've used European aesthetics and standards as a starting point for creating my own work. So this notion of "feeling colored" has to do with drawing upon Afro-American culture as a foundation for creating art.* ~ Carrie Mae Weems[60]

At the same time that *Ain't Jokin'* sparked protest, *Colored People* was without controversy. Most critics interpret it with optimism, focusing on the beautiful colors and children. However, several writers also evoke mug shots and ethnographic photography hand-in-hand with the joyful descriptions of beautiful children. Andrea Miller-Keller calls it "a tender, endearing series," while Andrea Kirsch calls the series "a loving embrace of our polychrome humanity," even while she likens the photographs to mug shots and the nineteenth-century association between photography, eugenics, and criminology.[61]

New York Times critic Holland Cotter also points toward criminal photography, saying that this series tackles "the continuing history of racism" through "mug-shot-style portraits of African-American children." He offers one of the few analyses that articulates—at least in part—the complexity of the work, saying, "The results were beautiful—and Ms. Weems puts a high value on formal beauty—but the colors carried

---

[59] Zora Neale Hurston, "How It Feels To Be Colored Me," in *Folklore, Memoirs, and Other Writings* (New York: The Library of America, 1995) 826.

[60] Deborah Willis-Thomas, "Weems, Carrie Mae," in *An Illustrated Bio-Bibliography of Black Photographers, 1940-1988* (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1989), 148.

[61] Miller-Keller, 4; Kirsch, 16.

complex messages. They are reminders that the range of skin colors covered by 'black' is vast. But they also suggest that the social hierarchies arbitrarily built on color are operative as a kind of internalized racism among African-Americans who privilege light shades of brown skin."[62]

Even with Cotter's references to criminality and internalized racism, these tripartite, toned images of children are mostly noted for their beauty. In a 1993 interview with Susan Canning, Weems notes, "…they are all beautiful, they're all children. There's nobody in there over 18. That was one of the points, of dealing with the idea of color as it exists among young children, young people as they struggle to get their identity. There hasn't been any controversy."[63] Yet, *Colored People* is not merely "endearing" or beautiful pictures of children, nor is it just a reminder of the range of colors encompassed by the term "black." Rather, this series signifies on color by critiquing the system and categories of skin color, along with the language that forms them.

Even the title signifies. By calling it *Colored People*, Weems refers to the now old-fashioned term for African Americans that, upon its adoption, was simultaneously a label of pride and a means to distinguish lighter-skinned blacks from darker-skinned ones.[64] In his 1994 memoir *Colored People*, Gates traces the transition between what he

---

[62] Holland Cotter, "Testimony of a Cleareyed Witness: Carrie Mae Weems Charts the Black Experience in Photographs," *The New York Times*, January 23, 2014.

[63] Susan Canning, "Interview: Carrie Mae Weems," *Art Papers* 17, no. 3 (June 5, 1993): 38. And yet, some are not children, like *Chocolate Colored Man* which uses the photograph of the black man from the *Ain't Jokin'* work *What's a cross between an ape and a nigger?*

[64] Harris, *Colored Pictures: Race and Visual Representation*, 7; Sterling Stuckey, *Slave Culture: Nationalist Theory and the Foundation of Black America* (New York: Oxford

calls “a colored world of the fifties, a Negro world of the early sixties, and the advent of a black world of the later sixties.”[65] Here he talks about his childhood in West Virginia with ethnicities separated by individual neighborhoods and argues, “But of course, the colored world was not so much a neighborhood as a condition of existence.”[66]

Weems plays with the system of labels and language that shape this condition in her series. She colors her black-and-white photographs by overlaying the tint. These colors range from actual terms for African American skin tones (red bone, yella) to the ridiculous or impossible (blue, magenta). Take, for instance, *Golden Yella Girl* [Fig. 2.18]. Here we have a triptych of a young girl seen in profile with the sun highlighting her face. The photograph, repeated three times, is tinted with the titular golden yellow and framed in all black. Underneath each picture appears one word—GOLDEN, YELLA, and GIRL.

The image and text call to mind a commonly-used African American term for light skin, high yella, a term that indicates white ancestry. Owners commonly raped and impregnated their slaves, which led to generations of pale-skinned enslaved people, some of whom had more European ancestry than African. These light-skinned slaves were commonly employed as house servants, either because of or despite their similar

---

University Press, 1987), 193–244. See also the disambiguation outlined in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, “Coloured | Colored, Adj. and N.,” *OED Online* (Oxford University Press), accessed February 26, 2017, http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/36607.

[65] Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *Colored People: A Memoir* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), xvi. Some, when discussing *Colored People*, emphasize the history of white people using the term (such as Kirsch, “Carrie Mae Weems: Issues in Black, White, and Color,” 13), but I feel that this does not fully articulate the scope of the series.

[66] Gates, *Colored People,* 8.

appearance to the white owners.[67] The historical and economic realities of advantage and preference for lighter skin individuals resulted in a complex system of labeling shades of black by African Americans, ranging from light (red bone, high yella) to medium (café au lait, chocolate brown) to dark (walnut, blue-black).[68] This system—particularly when noting the preference for lighter skin—is often referred to as colorism. *Colored People*, with works like *Golden Yella Girl*, subverts the language of this internalized racism with its charmingly literal visual translation.

In another example, *Red Bone Boy* [Fig. 2.19], we see a grade-school-aged black boy standing in front of a building with his shoulder facing the camera and his head turned to the right to look into the lens. Weems tints the photograph in a sienna color and prints the words RED, BONE, and BOY under the three images from left to right. Red bone—the term that Weems's family called her—is used for a light-skinned black person with red undertones as opposed to yellow ones.[69] Even though she fondly recalls her own childhood nickname, the artist says that these labels nearly always cause negative damage in some way or another as we grow older.[70] With this, *Colored People* becomes personal for the artist in a way that is different from *Family Pictures*. Labels

---

[67] The genetic relationship between slave and master would afford privilege (such as less physically taxing jobs), but had its own issues too (such as cruel treatment from the jealous master's wife or from white siblings). See Lori L. Tharps, *Same Family, Different Colors: Confronting Colorism in America's Diverse Families* (Beacon Press, 2016), 23–25; Cedric Herring, Verna Keith, and Hayward Derrick Horton, *Skin/Deep: How Race and Complexion Matter in the "Color-Blind" Era* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004).

[68] Harris, *Colored Pictures*, 7; Tharps, *Same Family, Different Colors*, 63–64.

[69] Miller-Keller, 4.

[70] Weems, in conversation with the author, January 18, 2017.

like red bone and yella implicate black people and the prejudice of colorism. Weems repeats (and modifies) the idea of red bone in the tinted image and text to force the viewer to consider the term, its meaning, and its consequences. In doing so, she folds the label in on itself, leaving the viewer to ponder it and its effects on these young children.

The colors showcased in *Colored People* come not only from the names for skin tones, but they also drift to the absurd and unnatural, as in *Moody Blue Girl* [Fig. 2.20] and *Magenta Colored Girl* [Fig. 2.21]. The latter, for instance, tints a photograph of a young girl in a tee shirt and headband with a totally unnatural vivid purple. In *Moody Blue Girl*, the young person's skin is the blue of a science fiction alien. Here Weems signifies on race through culture, rather than skin color, with the triptych of a young black girl with her face lifted toward the sky, eyes closed, and basking in the sunlight.

Moody Blue Girl has much in common with Adrian Piper's contemporaneous work also titled *Colored People* [Fig. 2.22]. Originally produced in conjunction with the 1987 exhibition "Coast to Coast: Women of Color National Artists' Book Project," it was not published until 1991.[71] Piper's *Colored People* is a collaborative work with a number of scholars, critics, and artists, each of whom submitted photographic portraits that express the colloquial translation of a color into a mood from "Scarlett with Embarrassment" to "Black Depression."[72] After she gathered the photographs, Piper

---

[71] Adrian Piper, *Colored People* (London: Book Works, 1991), n.p.

[72] There are sixteen participants who responded to Piper's request from an original invitation sent to thirty-six individuals. The responders included Houston Conwill, Kinshasha Conwill, Jane Farver, David Frankel, Sam Gilliam, Kellie Jones, Lucy Lippard, Rosemary Mayer, John Moore, John Morita, Clive Phillpot, Howardena Pindell, Lowery Sims, Kaylynn Sullivan, Judith Wilson, and Josephine Withers.

used a crayon to draw over their faces with the corresponding color. For example, in the "Tickled Pink" section, one of the photographs shows art historian Kellie Jones with her eyes wide and a huge smile on her face [Fig. 2.22, bottom left]. "Blue" is the only section title that has the color name without an associated emotion. While the colloquial associations of emotion and color often include both names ("green with envy" or "white with fear"), blue is often used on its own to express melancholy. It is a feeling that is both *a mood* and *moody*.

But *Moody Blue Girl* acts as more than a "lighthearted conceptual gesture," as Piper originally conceived of her project.[73] The name evokes music, specifically African American blues and the white rock-and-roll that came from it.[74] Weems's *Moody Blue Girl* pictures the emotions of the blues, as Young describes:

> Urban and rural, tragic and comic, modern as African America and primal as America, the blues are as innovative in structure as they are in mood—they resurrect old feelings even as they describe them in new ways. They are the definitive statement of that new invention, the African American, though when Langston Hughes first wrote on them and through them in the 1920s, he felt as much resistance from black folks as white.[75]

Not only does Weems's *Moody Blue Girl* describe its sentiments in a new, visual way, but, by evoking the culture and aesthetics of the blues, it evokes the idea of a racialized modernity that Young describes above. *Colored People*'s pared down, monochromatic

---

[73] Piper, *Colored People*, n.p.

[74] In addition to the 1960s English rock band called The Moody Blues, "Moody Blue" was Elvis Presley's last number one hit. It was released in November 1976, less than a year before he died. See *Billboard Magazine*, February 12, 1977, 42.

[75] Young, *Grey Album*, 133.

squares visually connect blackness and modernism. Weems visually upsets the modernist apple cart in her colored squares of black children.[76]

When hung together [Fig. 2.2], *Colored People's* grid of tinted squares recalls Minimalist works by artists such as Ellsworth Kelly. Adrienne Edwards even describes the series as "a sentimental Minimalism."[77] The grid—a common twentieth-century art element that connotes repetition, structure, and modernity itself—gives equal visual weight to the separate components. In her seminal essay on grids, Rosalind Krauss tells us that the grid is an emblem of modernity, but not only that, she further argues,

> In the cultist space of modern art, the grid serves not only as emblem but also as myth. For like all myths, it deals with paradox or contradiction not by dissolving the paradox or resolving the contradiction, but by covering them over so that they seem (but only seem) to go away. The grid's mythic power is that it makes us able to think we are dealing with materialism (or sometimes science, or logic) while at the same time it provides us with a release into belief (or illusion, or fiction).[78]

With *Colored People,* Weems uses the repetition of the tripartite images and their arrangement in a grid to cover—if only faintly—the series' exploration of the manifestation of power and hierarchy in color.

---

[76] For more on the role of race and modernism, see Brent Hayes Edwards, *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003); Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2008); Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993); Ann Douglas, *Terrible Honesty: Mongrel Manhattan in the 1920s* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1996); Susan Gubar, *Racechanges: White Skin, Black Face in American Culture* (Cambridge: Oxford University Press, 2000).

[77] Edwards, "Carrie Mae Weems," 103.

[78] Krauss, Rosalind E., "Grids," in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, MA, and London: The MIT Press, 1985), 12. First appeared in *October*, no. 9 (Summer 1979).

Similarly, Korean American artist Byron Kim uses a grid to explore the back and forth between race and modernity in *Synecdoche* (1991-present) [Fig. 2.23]. An ongoing work, Kim started the project shortly after Weems completed *Colored People* as an abstract, group portrait of sorts. The work is made up of hundreds of eight-by-ten-inch panels painted in the shade of the sitter's skin. The overall image is a pixelated grid of various shades of pink and brown. Steven Nelson argues, "Kim has robbed abstraction of its supposed autonomy, infusing it instead with references to specific individual bodies identified simply by dint of their skin tone, and interrogating the obsession with skin tone as *the* marker of subjectivity."[79] Both Weems and Kim gesture toward the intersection of race and modernism. Like *Synecdoche*, *Colored People* also humanizes the grid.

Pointing toward the influence of mid-twentieth century painting in Weems's work, Edwards says, "With references to abstraction, the artist employs geometry as a formal device and color theory as a logical framework to enable subtle reflection on the illogical constructs of how we frame race and how race frames beings."[80] Weems expands the logic of a system that names and organizes skin tones with the literal translation into colors. She then collapses the system in on itself with the addition of colors completely outside the system, like magenta. This is an act of signifyin'. *Colored People* doubles down on the colorist hierarchy to subvert and destabilize it.

---

[79] Steven Nelson, "Diaspora and Contemporary Art: Multiple Practices, Multiple Worldviews"," in *Companion to Contemporary Art Since 1945*, ed. Amelia Jones, Blackwell Companions to Art History (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), 306.

[80] Edwards, "Carrie Mae Weems," 103.

Conclusion

Ain't Jokin' repeats and revises racial jokes and stereotypes with its photographs and texts. Instead of the racist image of a comic darky in heaven with a slice of watermelon, she shows us a sentient black man who understands the implications at work in that association. Instead of letting her viewers feel satisfied that they are not racist, she implicates them with the action of the question-and-answer jokes. With these moves, Weems signifies on race and power.

On the surface, *Colored People* might seem like merely beautifully-colored photographs of sweet, innocent children—or, as Kirsch describes, "a loving embrace of our polychrome humanity"—but it is so much more. Like *Ain't Jokin'*, *Colored People* uses the structure of signifyin' to undercut the issues of power that are the foundation of race in the United States. She uses the formal language of modernism—the grid and colored squares—to reveal the pervasive framework of the caste system. The tension in *Colored People* exists between the seemingly impersonal aesthetic and the extensive and intimate consequences of modernist and racial hierarchies. *Colored People* signifies by reversing our expectations.

When Weems signifies in these two series, she playfully moves between the literal and metaphorical meanings of racist jokes and tropes. In *Ain't Jokin',* she bluntly translates offensive mental associations and question-and-answer jokes into visual depictions. *Colored People* similarly renders texts into image, this time concerned with colorism and the preference among African Americans for lighter skin. Considering these two series together affirms the importance of their signifyin' structure. They subvert the jokes and associations of their images and texts by repeating and modifying them. As such, they flip the roles of the text and subtext. Their text might

be racist jokes or lovely pictures of children, but the subtext is the relationship between race and power and its consequences. And that subtext is the point.

3

The Artist as an Intellectual Revolutionary

In a 1988 self-portrait, Carrie Mae Weems declares herself to be part of a larger body of radical intellectual workers. *Portrait of Myself as an Intellectual Revolutionary* [Fig. 3.1] shows the artist sitting at a desk with a hand-grenade-shaped lamp and three posters on the wall behind her. A portrait of Karl Marx is in the center, with a Soviet propaganda poster featuring a female worker to the left and a half-hidden picture black man to the right.[1] By flanking Marx with a revolutionary woman and a black man, Weems connects the power dynamics of gender, class, and race. With the title, she asserts the importance of the academic side of the revolution. Her work follows in the tradition of these sources she cites—Marx, the Russian socialist revolution, and black radical politics.

Weems's art continually returns to a critique of power within American society. When Dawoud Bey asked about her early work, she replied, "[F]rom the beginning, I've been interested in the idea of power and the consequences of power…. In one way or another, my work endlessly explodes the limits of tradition. I'm determined to find new models to live by. Aren't you?"[2] From 1988-1991 Weems made two photographic series and an artist's book that investigate the power dynamics of race, class, and gender:

[1] The 1926 poster is credited to A. I. Strakhov-Braslavskij says in Russian below the image, "Emancipated Woman—Build Up Socialism." See "Emancipated Woman—Build Up Socialism: Propoganda Posters in Communist Russia," in the online exhibition "Women, Politics, and Power," by the International Museum of Women, http://exhibitions.globalfundforwomen.org/exhibitions/women-power-and-politics/appearance/emancipated#.

[2] Bey, "Carrie Mae Weems."

American Icons (1988-89), *Then What? Photographs and Folklore* (1990), *And 22 Million Very Tired and Very Angry People* (1991). Each of these works offers a critique of racialized and gendered power dynamics in American culture through everyday objects and vernacular texts. In these works, Weems makes new models and shows us as her viewers how to do so ourselves.

American Icons is a collection of six black-and-white photographs of domestic interiors. Each scene shows a contemporary American home with caricatured ceramic figurines of black or Asian figures. The artist's book *Then What? Photographs and Folklore* was published to accompany an exhibition of the same name at the CEPA Gallery in Buffalo, New York. It contains eight trifold pages of images and texts dealing with the beliefs, rituals, tall tales, and lyrics that document African American life. *And 22 Million Very Tired and Very Angry People* is a collection of fifteen large-format polaroid photographs and fifteen fabric banners. The images together with the different texts—including the simple, yet thought-provoking captions and the banners full of quotes from artists, scholars, and activists—argue for equality and reform.

The connecting thread of these three works is their use of the traditional stories and things of African American culture, that is, the objects, jokes, literature, and practices that transmit the knowledge that folklorists examine for insight into a culture. Building on her training in folklore at UC Berkeley, Weems uses them to shed light on issues of race and power in North America. While many hear the term "folklore" and assume that what is meant is something naïve, primitive, or limited to things such as

legends and fairy tales, professional folklorists take a broader view of the term. Folklore can be anything that people traditionally do, make, know, and say.[3]

Folklore is how humans separate themselves into *us* and *them*. It makes up the defining borders of people groups, marking outsiders and insiders. Folklorists Martha C. Sims and Martine Stephens explain the breadth and depth of the field:

> Folklore is many things, and it's almost impossible to define succinctly. It's both what folklorists study and the name of the discipline they work within… Folklore exists in cities, suburbs and rural villages, in families, work groups and dormitories. Folklore is present in many kinds of informal communication, whether verbal (oral and written texts), customary (beliefs, rituals) or material (physical objects). It involves values, traditions, ways of thinking and behaving. It's about art. It's about people and the way people learn. It helps us learn who we are and how to make meaning in the world around us.[4]

Weems's art uses African American folklore—its jokes, music, tales, and objects—to provide a distinctly black vision of American culture. The three works examined here shed light on how black cultural products shape and have been shaped by the construction of identity in the United States. Furthermore, by turning to these types of cultural products, Weems upends the traditional and canonical representations of the United States.

Weems's work as an intellectual revolutionary is to intervene in society by examining social structures and providing alternate modes of being in the world. Her artwork questions the inequalities of race, class, and gender in American culture. In *American Icons, And 22 Million,* and *Then What* she investigates the role of images, things, and words in this power structure. These works undercut the structures of

---

[3] See Jan Harold Brunvand, *The Study of American Folklore: An Introduction*, 2nd ed. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company Inc., 1978); Henry Glassie, *The Spirit of Folk Art* (New York: Abrams, 1989).
[4] Martha C. Sims and Martine Stephens, *Living Folklore: An Introduction to the Study of People and Their Traditions* (Logan: Utah State University Press, 2005), 1–2.

American culture that limit the full participation by those of us who are not white men. As she declared to Bey, they explode the limits of tradition and form new models for us to follow. Her work as an intellectual revolutionary in these series creates a new model that is both specifically black and American.

American Icons

> *It's not just that it's in the figurines…. It is that we are seen that way, perceived that way, even in terms of public policy. And that our lives are lived under that shadow. And sometimes we then even come to believe it ourselves.*[5] ~ Barbara Christian

In *American Icons*, Weems uses caricatured figures to explore racism in American society. In each of the series' six images, we see a domestic interior with a figurine displayed seemingly innocuously. There are salt and peppershakers, thermometers, ashtrays, lamps, and other small statues. *Untitled (Letter Holder)* [Fig. 3.2], for instance, shows a neat desk with stacks of notebooks and a collection of various office supplies. But in the middle of the frame, illuminated by the harsh light of a small lamp, stands a small figure of an African American man in work clothes. With the dark skin and wide lips of a minstrel character, he pushes a trunk designed to hold papers. By evoking the caricature of blackface performance, the figure suggests that his place in the office is a joke. The mammy and uncle figurines in *Untitled (Salt and Pepper Shaker)* [Fig. 3.3] and *Untitled (Orleans)* [Fig. 3.4] also invoke the racist notions of black labor. Their clothing—aprons, chef's hats, and kerchiefs—are immediately understandable as the uniforms of domestic servants, figures who are relegated to remain in the kitchen.

---

[5] Marlon Riggs, *Ethnic Notions* (California Newsreel, 1987), 3:21-3:38, http://newsreel.org/video/ethnic-notions.

And when we see these figures, we become witnesses and consumers of the knickknacks and their racist implications.

The racist memorabilia in *American Icons* share a history with minstrel figures and other stereotyped visualizations of race. They exemplify what Patricia A. Turner describes as "contemptible collectables."[6] These objects—faithful groom hitching posts, pickaninny figures, and topsy-turvy dolls—demonstrate an often-unrecognized eroding of equality within popular culture.[7] The casualness of their display in this series' domestic scenes underscores the subtle work of prejudice within American culture. Yet, the artist calls them *American Icons*, an indicator that they are not minor, but rather tell us something fundamental about our nation.

What does it mean to call these racist caricatures American icons? Icons are symbols or motifs that recur so often that they take on meaning beyond themselves. National icons, in particular, orient us toward a collective identity and memory.[8] When the artist claims these objects as American icons, she argues that racialization—particularly derogatory and power-laden racialization—defines the United States.

Weems is not alone in her examination of these Americana items. Janette Faulkner, an African American social worker who amassed thousands of the figures by the 1970s, brought them to public attention through mainstream media, including the

---

[6] Patricia A. Turner, *Ceramic Uncles & Celluoid Mammies: Black Images and Their Influence on Culture* (New York: Anchor Books, 1994), 11.

[7] Turner, 11.

[8] Robert Hariman and John Louis Lucaites, *No Caption Needed: Iconic Photographs, Public Culture, and Liberal Democracy* (University of Chicago Press, 2007), 1–2. Hariman and Lucaites make a powerful argument for the important role of photography in American history and public life. However, they utterly ignore the photojournalism of the Civil Rights Era, a lapse that leaves their account lacking.

Today show, and an exhibition titled "Ethnic Notions: Black Images in the White Mind" at the Berkeley Art Center in 1982 and again in 2000.[9] Faulkner believed that these items could be used to teach people about race in the United States. In her work with these contemptible collectibles, she joins other African Americans have sought to reclaim and recontextualize these figures to show the scope of racism within popular culture.

Inspired by Faulkner, independent filmmaker Marlon Riggs researched and created his documentary *Ethnic Notions*, a title that he took directly from the Berkeley exhibition. This educational film traces the evolution of racism in the United States through the prevalence and use of ethnic stereotypes found in consumer goods and ephemera. It argues that black stereotypes have changed along with the move from slavery to Jim Crow. Before emancipation, American visual culture most commonly showed African Americans as happy darkies, people who were perfectly content as slaves. After Reconstruction, however, the stereotypes changed. Black men were pictured as savages or brutes who were a threat to civilization. In each moment, the stereotypes and the visual culture that promoted them supported white supremacy.

In the documentary, Riggs interviews scholars of history and culture about how these caricatured collectibles have shaped our understanding of racial difference. The film emphasizes that even though these objects might appear to be harmless home goods, they have political and cultural power. Historian Larry Levine argues that the consumer appeal of these objects reflects the pervasive inequality and conditions of

---

[9] Turner, *Ceramic Uncles & Celluoid Mammies: Black Images and Their Influence on Culture*, 5–6. For more information on the exhibition, see Robbin Henderson, *Ethnic Notions: Black Images in the White Mind* (Berkeley: Berkeley Art Center, 1982).

oppression that shape reality for black Americans.[10] The consumable nature of these ethnic collectibles perpetuates racist stereotypes—the more that someone sees these happy and servile mammies, uncles, and pickaninnies, the more they can believe that they reflect reality. By providing the historical and cultural context for these figures, Faulkner and Riggs sought to undermine their power.

Artists long have used such figures in their work to combat racist stereotypes. In the 1960s and 1970s, several artists returned to the image of the mammy as exemplified by Aunt Jemima to connect with both the pop art movement and the socially-conscious Black Arts Movement.[11] Three early examples include *Aunt Jemima and the Pillsbury Doughboy* by Jeff Donaldson (1963) [Fig. 3.5], *The New Aunt Jemima* by Joe Overstreet (1964) [Fig. 3.6], and *The Liberation of Aunt Jemima* by Betye Saar (1972) [Fig. 3.7]. Donaldson's painting features a violent scene where Jemima is attacked by her white male partner. His painting is a critique of American racism with a distorted national flag in the background. While Donaldson calls the man who attacks her the Pillsbury

[10] Riggs, *Ethnic Notions*, 2:57-3:16 and 3:56-4:10.

[11] The figure of the mammy is perhaps the longest lasting and most recognizable of the gendered black myths and has substantially shaped the view of black womanhood in America. For more information on the history between advertising and the mammy image, in particular that of Aunt Jemima, see Deborah Willis, "Picturing the New Negro Woman," in *Black Womanhood: Images, Icons, and Ideologies of the African Body*, ed. Barbara Thompson (Hanover, NH: Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth College, 2008), 226–45; Michael D. Harris, "Aunt Jemima, the Fantasy Black Mammy/Servant," in *Colored Pictures: Race and Visual Representation* (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 83–124.

Doughboy—a branded character whose name recalls the World War I soldiers—he is dressed as a cop, complete with badges on his arm and a billy club or baton.[12]

Overstreet's large painted sculpture also shows a violent scene, but this time Jemima is actor rather than receiver. She holds and fires a machine gun onto an unsuspecting globe while a grenade flies overhead. She is a new Jemima, and she fights back. Overstreet's Jemima maintains her friendly smile as if she is happy to finally render justice for the wrongs done to her people.

Saar's Jemima, created almost a decade later, appropriates the imagery from *Ladies Home Journal* ads for the pancake mix for the background.[13] In front of the tiled advertising images, Saar placed a smiling sculptural figure with a broom in one hand and a gun in the other. In the bottom half of her skirt, Saar adds an image of a black mammy holding a crying, light-skinned child.[14] She explains why she turned to these caricatured images:

> I had a lot of hesitation about using powerful, negative images such as these – thinking about how white people saw black people, and how that influenced the ways in which black people saw each other. What saved it was that I made Aunt Jemima into a revolutionary figure. It came at the right time and if I have

---

[12] World War I soldiers were commonly referred to as doughboys. They were memorialized in E. M. Viquesney's mass-produced sculpture of the 1920s and 1930s, *Spirit of the American Doughboy*.

[13] Sharon F. Patton, *African-American Art*, Oxford History of Art (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 201; "Influences: Betye Saar," accessed January 12, 2018, https://frieze.com/article/influences-betye-saar.

[14] Saar refers to this child as a "mulatto" and argues that it reflects the way black women were exploited during slavery. But to me the child looks white, which recalls the practice of using black women as wet nurses for white children. Her point about the exploitation of black women, however, still stands: the bodies of black female slaves were exploited to the gain of white people. See "Influences."

> an iconic piece, this is it. I was recycling the imagery, in a way, from negative to positive, using the negative power against itself.[15]

Saar made her Jemima after a community center in Berkeley—"on the edge of Black Panther territory in Oakland," she says—put out a call for artworks that showed black heroes.[16] But she wanted a heroine, and thus transformed the mammy images she had collected. Saar, like Overstreet, armed her Jemima and made her a Black Power revolutionary by including a raised black fist in her assemblage.

These artists' appropriations of Aunt Jemima seek to uplift by transforming the image from one of smiling passivity to radical action. Less concerned with empowerment, however, *American Icons* seeks to showcase the influence of these caricatures within American culture.[17] Weems, like Faulkner and Riggs, works to contextualize and historicize these figures, but also, with her title *American Icons*, to associate these black caricatures with other symbols of the United States like the flag or the Statue of Liberty. By calling them American icons, she attaches them to the identity of the United States and directs our attention to the ways in which racial inequality has shaped our nation.

One way that she complicates the figures is by including both black and Asian caricatured figurines. In doing so, she adds layers to the notion of difference. Growing up on the West Coast and living in the Bay Area as a young person and graduate student, she would have been aware of racial discrimination against Asian Americans. For

---

[15] "Influences."

[16] "Influences."

[17] Kathryn E. Delmez, ed., *Carrie Mae Weems: Three Decades of Photography and Video* (New Haven and London: Frist Center for the Visual Arts in association with Yale University Press, 2012), 62.

instance, both *Untitled (Ashtray)* [Fig. 3.8] and *Untitled (Lamp)* [Fig. 3.9] include African American and Asian figures. In *Ashtray*, we see a small statue of a man in traditional Chinese dress standing near an ashtray of a dark-skinned figure holding a large tobacco leaf with a cigarette resting in its bowl. In *Lamp*, a ceramic lamp base in the shape of a Chinese laborer with a carrying pole, or yoke, resting on his shoulders takes up the upper right portion of the image.

Yet, hidden in the shadows of the shelves below the lamp, are album covers with images of black performers—"Famous Songs of Bert Williams" and "Legendary Alberta Hunter: The London Sessions." The Bert Williams album particularly showcases the complicated history of stereotypes and black performance. Williams was a late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century black comedian who performed in black face. He's even in black face on this particular album cover from 1940 [Fig. 3.10]. By performing in blackface, Williams re-appropriates the representative space of the performance of blackness.[18] Instead of using a mammy or uncle figurine here, Weems uses a photograph of a black performer in blackface, acknowledging the complex history of these images.

In a contemporaneous work, Weems also turns to the form of an album cover to examine the role of black performance and entertainment in American culture. In *Ode to Affirmative Action* [Fig. 3.11], Weems embodies the archetype of an African American lounge singer. This work, which is made in the form of a commemorative plaque for a gold record, contains several pieces of text that point to a broader statement about

[18] For more background and critical insight into Williams's life and career, see Louis Chude-Sokei, *The Last "Darky": Bert Williams, Black-on-Black Minstrelsy, and the African Diaspora* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2006).

American culture. Here, Weems (as the singer Dee Dee) poses with a microphone on the record cover. The record cover advertises "Dee Dee: Live at the Copa" with the single titled "If You Should Lose Me," while the record itself shows anther song from Clarksdale Records titled "Ode to Affirmative Action." Clarksdale, Mississippi, located near Memphis in the Mississippi River Delta, is one of the originating places for Delta Blues.[19] It is home to the crossroads of Highways 61 and 49 and the mythical origin story of bluesman Robert Johnson selling his soul to the devil in exchange for the ability to play the guitar. As Richard Powell tells us, Weems's references to blues, Copa Cabana, and affirmative action center around "black inclusion, participation, and advantage in a world that, alas, resemble[s] a mob-controlled nightclub."[20] With the fable of Johnson selling his soul to the devil to gain fame and fortune in the music industry, Weems here emphasizes the lengths to which black Americans have to go for success in a white-dominated culture. Weems does something similar in *Lamp* with the image of Williams in blackface. In this instance, however, she shows a man who takes the racist caricature and uses it to his own benefit.

By including both black and Asian stereotyped figures in *Lamp* and *Ashtray*, Weems recognizes the similar role of caricature in the historical barriers to assimilation for each. In the 1870s and 1880s, both Chinese immigrants to the United States and African Americans experienced legalized discrimination. While the Fifteenth Amendment (ratified in 1870) attempted to secure voting rights for African American

---

[19] Clarksdale, Mississippi, is also the hometown of Weems's mother, Carrie Polk Weems, and her family. Carrie Mae Weems, "Family Pictures and Stories: A Photographic Installation" (University of California San Diego, 1984), 3.

[20] Richard J. Powell, *Black Art: A Cultural History*, 2nd edition (London: Thames & Hudson, 2002), 202.

men, Jim Crow laws designed to restrict that voting cropped up across the South after the end of Reconstruction in 1877. In the West, legislation designed to restrict and eventually prevent Chinese immigration to the United States also appeared at that time, including the Page Act of 1875 and the Exclusion Act of 1882.[21] The connection of Asian and black caricatures in *American Icons* follows from nineteenth-century political cartoons, such as, Thomas Nast's 1879 cartoon for *Harper's Weekly* titled "'The nigger must go' and 'The Chinese must go'" [Fig. 3.12], which compares the harassment experienced by each ethnicity in different parts of the country. Using text on a wall behind the two figures and angry mobs in the background, Nast illustrates the difficult circumstances for people of color in the South and the West.[22] Similarly, Weems associates the distortion of these two groups by including the ethnic figurines in *American Icons.*

In *Ethnic Notions,* Barbara Christian traces the stereotypes from legal discrimination to self-image: "It's not just that it's in the figurines and in the, you know, coffee pots and so on. It is that we are seen that way, perceived that way, even in terms of public policy. And that our lives are lived under that shadow. And sometimes we then

[21] For more information on the nineteenth-century restriction of Chinese immigration into the United States with an emphasis on the role of visual culture, see Anna Pegler-Gordon, *In Sight of America: Photography and the Development of U.S. Immigration Policy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009).

[22] While this cartoon criticizes discrimination, Nast's other *Harper's Weekly* cartoons engage in the caricatured ethnic stereotyping common to the era. In "Colored Rule in a Reconstructed State" from 1874, he uses exaggerated physical features to mock the black majority in the South Carolina congress. For a detailed analysis of the political power of this and other cartoons from *Harper's Weekly, Currier and Ives,* and more, see Michael D. Harris, "The Nineteenth Century: Imaged Ideology," in *Colored Pictures: Race and Visual Representation* (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 39–82.

even come to believe it ourselves."[23] In *American Icons*, Weems uses the racist collectibles to show the sources and consequences of that shadow. This series elevates these contemptible collectibles to the status of icons. And as such, it acknowledges the monumental and imposing role that these stereotyped caricatures have played in American culture.

Then What? Photographs and Folklore

> *Folk-lore 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.* ~ Zora Neale Hurston[24]

In her 1935 collection of stories *Mules and Men*, ethnographer and writer Zora Neale Hurston explains the importance of jokes and stories of African American folklore to the collective sense of identity, pride, and self-protection. Continuing the above passage, she says:

> And the Negro, in spite of his open-faced laughter, his seeming acquiescence, is particularly evasive. You see we are a polite people and we do not say to our questioner, "Get out of here!" We smile and tell him or her something that satisfies the white person because, knowing so little about us, he doesn't know what he is missing. The Indian resists curiosity by a stony silence. The Negro offers a feather-bed resistance. That is, we let the probe enter, but it never comes out. It gets smothered under a lot of laughter and pleasantries.
>
> The theory behind our tactics: "The white man is always trying to know into somebody else's business. All right, I'll set something outside the door of my mind for him to play with and handle. He can read my writing but he sho' can't read my mind. I'll put this play toy in his hand and he will seize it and go away. Then I'll say my say and sing my song."[25]

---

[23] Riggs, *Ethnic Notions*, 3:21-3:38.

[24] Zora Neale Hurston, "Mules and Men," in *Folklore, Memoirs, and Other Writings* (New York: The Library of America, 1995), 10.

[25] Hurston, 10.

As Hurston articulates, black customs and traditions are a means of resistance, "that which the soul lives by" in the face of oppression. It is distraction-as-resistance, giving something minor or only what is expected to avoid giving away what is most important.

With *Then What? Photographs and Folklore*, Weems explores the many facets of these traditions. It demonstrates her ease of movement between her roles as folklorist and artist perhaps better than any of her other works. The work pairs black and white photographs with texts; in this way, it more closely resembles her works like *Family Pictures and Stories* and *Kitchen Table Series* than *American Icons*. *Then What* uses similar literary categories as some of her canonic series—as with *Family Pictures*, it includes personal stories and tall tales, and, as with *Kitchen Table Series*, it weaves lyrics in with the images and texts.[26] Yet, unlike the captions of previous series, the written words in this book are often superimposed onto the photographs, integrating the stories and pictures in a deeper way. Indeed, she weaves stories and music she heard as a child with those that she found in her own research into African American culture and folklore.[27]

The cover of the book is like a folder; it contains the eight trifold pages without a binding so that the reader can remove and unfold each section [Fig. 3.13]. Each trifold page functions as its own section and has a group of images and texts that cover similar themes such as folk remedies and superstitions, beliefs about skin color and hair, family

[26] The songs of *Then What* mostly come from blues songs. She includes lyrics from obscure early twentieth-century compositions, like "Coon Song," but also others, like "Viola Lee Blues," which have been covered many times by a range of musicians.

[27] Hikmet Doğu and James H. Carmin, "Review of Then What?: Photographs and Folklore," *Art Documentation: Bulletin of the Art Libraries Society of North America* 10, no. 1 (Spring 1991): 46.

life and motherhood, and the church.[28] The title *Then What?* comes from lists of questions in the two different sections of the book. Structured as if/then sentences, they ask about peculiar actions and situations: If you leave your purse on the floor, then what? If you dream of fish, then what? If your nose itches, then what?[29] Weems answers most of these questions throughout the folded pages in the images or stories or by a simple statement. And so she tells us, "When you dream of fish it means that somebody you know is pregnant…. If you leave your purse on the floor you'll never have money…. If your nose itches somebody is coming to visit."[30]

In the first section of *Then What*, you find a series of images that evoke ritual and religion. Upon turning the first page, you see Weems in a white short-sleeved dress and head wrap. In the picture, the woman stands, leaning forward, in a room with a bright window covered by blinds and an old portrait of a woman on the wall. She looks anguished: bent over, grasping her skirt, pain on her face. Her mouth is open and she appears to be crying or chanting. A small table stands behind her with candles and wine. On the opposite page is the following text: "If you cut a watermelon with a knife its heart will bleed and lose its sweetness. To avoid a bleeding heart break the melon with your

---

[28] Given the nature of the folder-and-trifold form of the book, the sections are moveable and therefore have no official order, excepting the first one with the title page. The following are the order and themes that I am using for each section: (1) conjure, healing, and ritual; (2) black masculinity and incarceration; (3) motherhood, remedies and signs; (4) hair and family stories; (5) the black church; (6) colorism; (7) love and romance; (8) folk beliefs, ritual, and High John the Conqueror. Sections 6 and 7 contain images used in her series *Colored People* and *Kitchen Table*, respectively.

[29] These questions and other texts quoted here come from the artist book itself, which is not paginated, Carrie Mae Weems, *Then What? Photographs and Folklore* (Buffalo, NY: CEPA Gallery, 1990), n. p.

[30] Weems, n. p.

fist or foot, then scoop out the heart and eat it."[31]

Opening the next page reveals a trio of textless images [Fig. 3.13, bottom image], starting with the previous photograph of the woman. The second picture shows a wooden chair on a carpeted floor and small ceramic dish holding water sitting in the lower right-hand corner. In the third image, we see a woman's back from the shoulders upward. Her arm is raised and another person has his hand on her head. Finally, when folded up, the back page contains a photo of an undressed woman lying down on her stomach with her head turned to the left and her hands palms-up. Three candles encircle her head and shoulders and two more sit by her feet. The dish from the first photograph is in the upper left corner.

The photographs and text of this section bring together elements of conjure: the candles, the wine, the water, and the ancestral presence of the portrait all evoke the rituals of religious practice like that of washing feet or laying on of hands. When combined with the elements of pain—the woman's face, the stomping and cutting of the melon, its bleeding heart—the impression left is one of a ritual for healing or initiation. In fact, these images recall the process Hurston describes in "Hoodoo in America" where she is initiated as a hoodoo doctor in New Orleans. In her final three days as a novitiate, Hurston was required to lay face-down and naked with only water. After the three days were over, she dressed in white with a veil covering her face and seated in a chair. The final ceremonial acts also involved candles and wine.[32]

The African American practice of hoodoo or conjure combines elements of

---

[31] Weems, n. p.

[32] For the full story of Hurston's initiation see Hurston, "Mules and Men," 188–93.

Christianity with West African religious beliefs. Hurston explains, "Hoodoo, or Voodoo as pronounced by the whites, is burning with a flame in America, with all the intensity of a suppressed religion. It has its thousands of secret adherents. It adapts itself like Christianity to its locale, reclaiming some of its borrowed characteristics to itself."[33] These borrowed elements, Hurston tells us, include fire, like candles at a Christian altar, and water, as used in the rite of baptism.[34] Weems draws upon these notions of elemental power in this first section with the fire of the candles and the bowl of water.

The artist does something similar in another section of *Then What*. Here she places photographs of rural Americans landscapes alongside the hero legend taken from Hurston's text of High John the Conqueror, an African prince sold into slavery who becomes a trickster figure. John is a "hope-bringer" whom Huston merges with the folk hero who outwits his white owner in the John and Ole Massa stories.[35] John is related to other figures like Br'er Rabbit who overcome seemingly hopeless dilemmas with laughter and his wits.[36]

One side of the page has two images: a photograph of water and another of an outdoor altar, whose edges bleed across the folds of the trifold paper [Fig. 3.14]. Printed directly onto the water image is a passage taken from Hurston's retelling of the John the

---

[33] Hurston, 176.

[34] Hurston, 176.

[35] Zora Neale Hurston, "High John de Conquer," *The American Mercury*, October 1943, 450; Alan Dundes, ed., *Mother Wit from the Laughing Barrel: Readings in the Interpretation of Afro-American Folklore* (Jackson and London: University Press of Mississippi, 1973), 541–42. For more John and Ole Massa stories, see Harry Oster's "John and Old Marster" in Dundes, 549–60 and Hurston, "Mules and Men," 72–75.

[36] Hurston, "Mules and Men," 229.

Conqueror story:

> High John de Conquer came to be a man, and a mighty man at that. But he was not a natural man in the beginning. First off, he was a whisper, a will to hope, a wish to find something worthy of laughter and song. Then the whisper put on flesh. His footsteps sound across the world in a low but musical rhythm as if the world he walked on was a signing-drum [*sic.*]. Black people had an irresistible impulse to laugh. High John de Conquer was a man in full, and had come to live and work on the plantations, and all the slave folks knew him in the flesh… He is not so well known to the present generation of colored people in the same way that he was in slavery time…. High John de Conquer went back to Africa, but he left his power here, and placed his American dwelling in the root of a certain plant. Possess that root, and he can be summoned at any time.[37]

With this passage Weems emphasizes John the Conqueror's connection to hope through laughter and music, as well as the conjure powers in the root of the same name. This root is used in hoodoo rituals and mojo bags for good luck, power, and success in one's endeavors.[38] Thus the diasporic folk hero and root of the same name are used as symbolic means of protection from white oppression. When Weems superimposes this story onto the photographs of the water and an altar, she emphasizes the power of conjure to protect, sanctify, and heal along with the power of diasporic affiliation.

Weems is not the only artist of the late twentieth century to use her art to draw upon the elemental power of hoodoo. Renée Stout, for instance, explores power,

---

[37] Weems, *Then What? Photographs and Folklore*, n.p., quoted from Hurston's "High John De Conquer," in *The Sanctified Church* (Berkeley: Turtle Island Press, 1983), 69-78. Hurston's essay was originally published in *The American Mercury*, October 1943. In the original text of both *The Sanctified Church* and *The American Mercury*, Hurston says "singing-drum" instead of "signing-drum."

[38] Zora Neale Hurston, "Hoodoo in America," *The Journal of American Folklore* 44, no. 174 (1931): 413. Some scholars also argue that the John the Conqueror root is the same one carried by Frederick Douglass in his slave narrative to prevent any white man from hitting him. See Carolyn Morrow Long, "John the Conqueror: From Root-Charm to Commercial Product," *Pharmacy in History* 39, no. 2 (1997): 47–48; and Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (New York: Penguin Books, 2014 [1845]), 71.

religion, and the body as an object with her mixed media works beginning in the 1980s. She often incorporates natural materials (like roots or her own hair) with religious forms into her work, resulting in an embodied object that blurs the line between art and ritual objects.[39] *Fetish No. 2* (1988) [Fig. 3.15], transforms a life-size sculpture of her own naked body into a ritual object. Stout has covered it with power objects like beads and shells and has inserted a box with a glass cover at the navel, much like an *nkisi nkondi* from Kongo. It's also a critique of the term fetish: while *minkisi* were often called fetish objects by colonialist explorers and scholars, by using the naked female body Stout critiques the notion of the black female body as a sexual object.

With *Trinity* [Fig. 3.16] from 1992, Stout again plays on the overlapping roles of art object and ritual object. Here the artist transforms a wooden chest into a triptych altar with portraits of herself, her sister, and her mother, a feminist move in which she replaces the male Holy Trinity with black women. Instead of being a religious vessel, these women become the spiritual source.[40] Yet Stout is not only invoking Christian ritual in this work: under the portraits she mixes an invented script with legible text that tells of a longstanding disagreement between the sisters over dirt taken from their grandmother's grave evoking the hoodoo power of death and the natural world. The artist carries these themes of ritual and family into *My Altar/My Grandmother's Altar* [Fig. 3.17], also from 1992. In this installation, she reimagines the domestic space of the living room and intergenerational difference by having two altars on opposite sides of

[39] Michael Harris, "Resonance, Transformation, and Rhyme: The Art of Renée Stout," in *Astonishment and Power* (Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution Press for the National Museum of African Art, 1993), 107.

[40] Ibid., 117.

the room, separated by a table and two armchairs facing opposite directions.[41] Her grandmother's altar consists of family portraits, various Christian icons, and a TV playing a loop of the *700 Club*. Stout's altar, meanwhile, features a small wooden, glass-front cabinet full of cultural and natural objects—like dolls, Haitian Vodou flags, antlers, and candles—with family photographs resting on top.

With these works, Stout blurs the boundaries between belief and ritual, subject and object, viewer and participant. In *Fetish No. 2,* she casts herself in the role of power object while the viewer becomes the participant.[42] While in *Trinity* and *My Altar/My Grandmother's Altar,* she combines Christian ritual with hoodoo ritual as a means to examine personal history and power. By using elements of ritual and history, she explores the cultural implications of power. Like Stout, Weems invokes elements of conjure to examine the links between history, culture, and power structures. In her sections on conjure in *Then What*, Weems highlights the alternative routes to power taken by African Americans when society and its racist hierarchy denied them further agency.[43] Here folklore, tales, and rituals are a means of resistance and survival in the face of oppression.

By focusing on black folklore in 1990, *Then What* also argues against the difference-erasing sameness of the era's multiculturalism. Steven Nelson tells us:

> Multiculturalism, in this atmosphere [of the 1980s], could be seen as a panacea, superficially bringing disparate worlds into contact. However, it cannot

---

[41] Jennifer A. Gonzalez, "Archaeological Devotion," in *With Other Eyes: Looking at Race and Gender in Visual Culture*, edited by Lisa Bloom (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999): 193.

[42] Harris, "Resonance, Transformation, and Rhyme," 131.

[43] Kellie Jones, "In Their Own Image," in *EyeMinded: Living and Writing Contemporary Art* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011), 335.

> acknowledge the fact that, all too often, these disparate worlds do not just meet, they collide. In multiculturalism's big tent, distinctions between the margin and the center become seemingly unimportant and almost disappear from our psyches. But as we have repeatedly seen, collisions continually assert the existence of the margins as well as the center. Love may see no color, but people do. Collisions expose the power relationships that are always subtly masked by superficial multiculturalism.[44]

Then What removes any trace of multicultural diversity at a time when it was embraced vocally (albeit superficially). The book relies solely on African American folklore—a product of the collision between white and black culture—to underscore the power dynamics at work in American society.

In other sections, Weems explores the power dynamics at work in American social structure as they relate to gender identity. One section—which explores heterosexual relationship dynamics, black masculinity, and skin color—mixes a series of the "then what?" questions, photographs of domestic scenes, and blues lyrics. Two of the images are interior domestic scenes—a bedroom and a kitchen—with conversational text printed on them. Their captions come from a black female voice and address romantic relationships with men. One shows a glimpse through a doorway of a bedroom with a hat resting on the bed [Fig. 3.18]. The text in the upper right corner says, "Girl evidently the man plans on staying cause when I got home from work yesterday his hat was on my bed." Opposite this image is the series of questions, including one that asks, "If you put a hat on the bed, then what?" Each question refers to a superstition, and with this photograph, Weems gives us an answer.

This section opens with a single image—*Jim, If You Choose* [Fig. 3.19]—where a black man sits at a table, smoking and drinking, and glances down to his left where a

---

[44] Steven Nelson, "The Museum on My Mind," in *New Histories*, ed. Lia Gangitano and Steven Nelson (Boston: Institute of Contemporary Art, 1996), 25.

tape recorder rests.[45] At the bottom edge of the photograph are the words, "Jim, if you choose to accept, the mission is to land on your own two feet." The words along with visual elements of this photograph recall mid-twentieth-century television shows like *Mission Impossible* and the James Bond movies. The tape, alcohol, recorder, and smoke from his cigarette give off the impression of a spy listening to his next assignment from a self-destructing tape. That mission, as the caption tells us, is to land on his own two feet—a sly recognition that success and independence for those who are not white men in this system means resistance.[46]

A set of lyrics—printed like sheet music with both words and musical notation, seen when you fully expand the trifold page—give us a portion of the refrain from "Viola Lee Blues," a 1928 recording by the Memphis jug band Gus Cannon's Jug Stompers.[47] As a blues song, it uses the lyrics and music to give aural form the emotional pain of African American experiences, and the refrain printed here—which repeats the words "Some got six months, some got a solid year,/But me and my buddy, we got a lifetime here" two times—recalls the disproportionate incarceration rates for black men. The emotions of the blues generally, and this song particularly, echo that of the *Jim, If You Choose*

---

[45] The table is the same one used throughout *Kitchen Table Series*, but this image is not included in that work.

[46] bell hooks, "Talking Art with Carrie Mae Weems," in *Art on My Mind: Visual Politics* (New York: The New Press, 1995), 90.

[47] A jug band is an early twentieth-century string-band format that includes a variety of instruments—such as banjo, guitar, harmonica, and, of course, an empty glass jug—that plays country blues music. "Viola Lee Blues" was later recorded and made famous by the Grateful Dead. For more on the original recording, see Portia K. Maultsby, "The Translated African Cultural and Musical Past," in *African American Music: An Introduction*, second edition, edited by Mellonee V. Burnham and Portia K. Maultsby (New York and London: Routledge, 2015), 3-23.

photograph. That emotional vulnerability and its pain stems from the unequal position of black men in the United States.[48] By connecting the anguish of imprisonment in blues lyrics to Jim's mission of "landing on his own two feet," Weems highlights the social barriers that too often contain African American men. His mission is one of survival.

In the early 1990s, the cultural significations of black masculinity were important source material for black artistic interventions. The Whitney Museum of American Art, and curator Thelma Golden in particular, mined the theme of black masculinity for several of their early to mid-1990s shows, with the inclusion of George Holliday's footage of Los Angeles police officers beating Rodney King in the 1993 Biennial and the 1994 exhibition *Black Male: Representations of Masculinity in Contemporary American Art*. One work included in the latter show was *Lineup* by Gary Simmons [Fig. 3.20], where eight gold-plated sneakers rest in front of the horizontal black lines of a height chart. This installation explores in the stereotypical signifiers of black masculinity by associating the sneakers—icons of urban male athleticism—with the height chart from a police lineup or mugshot. Like Simmons, Weems examines the connection between black masculinity and incarceration via popular culture references.[49] With the juxtaposition of *Jim, If You Choose* with the blues lyrics, she reveals the barriers that can hinder even survival.

---

[48] hooks, "Talking Art with Carrie Mae Weems," 90.

[49] Also, both Simmons's *Lineup* and Weems's *Portrait of Myself as an Intellectual Revolutionary* appeared in the Whitney Museum of American Art's 2016-17 show "Human Interest: Portraits from the Whitney's Collection."

In *Then What*, Weems explores how folklore can become as a tool of power. Her explorations of masculinity emphasize the ways in which black men are held back, while her sections on conjure showcase an alternative means to power.

And 22 Million Very Tired and Very Angry People

> *At that moment we all knew that Cooke had been seriously on the money when he said, 'a change is gonna come' and that Foucault was dead wrong. If this ain't a unique moment, what is it!!!* ~ Carrie Mae Weems[50]

Like *American Icons* and *Then What, And 22 Million Very Tired and Very Angry People* examines the racial foundation of power and its consequences in the United States through its words and images. Of the fifteen polaroid photographs, thirteen are still lifes—images of single objects, like tools and household items—and the remaining two show a man and a woman. While *American Icons* is devoid of text, this body of work pairs its images with fifteen fabric banners covered with quotes from writers, artists, activists and theorists, including Frantz Fanon, Louisah Teish, Fannie Lou Hammer, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, and Herbert Marcuse [Fig. 3.21]. By pairing these photographs and texts, Weems imbues the objects with a sense of political urgency. Together they act as a call for equality and mass participation in political reform.

After working for more than a decade in black and white, Weems takes her first turn to color photography in *22 Million* after being invited by the Polaroid Corporation to use their 20 x 24 camera.[51] Yet, while the polaroids are technically color, she makes

---

[50] Carrie Mae Weems, *And 22 Million Very Tired and Very Angry People* (San Francisco: San Francisco Art Institute, 1992), not paginated.

[51] Andrea Kirsch, "Carrie Mae Weems: Issues in Black, White and Color," in *Carrie Mae Weems* (Washington, D.C.: National Museum of Women in the Arts, 1994), 15.

them monochrome with a series of filters. Andrea Kirsch points out that the resulting sepia tone is "more or less the color of [Weems's] own skin" and that by abstracting her color range, the artist comments on "the abstract nature of racial categories."[52] Even more, sepia was a term used in the 1940s for and by African Americans to side-step the perceived inaccuracies of the term Negro or other forms of "black," thus underscoring further the installation's concern with racial equality.[53]

This monochromatic color scheme also alters the way that we understand the objects in the pictures. The warm glow of the sepia filter signals age given that it was commonly used in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Weems also alters our perception of *22 Million's* everyday objects with the lighting. She elevates them from everyday goods by lighting them from the upper right corner, as you would with museum relics. Consequently, these typewriters, alarm clocks, and sheets of music are displayed as if they are precious items of immense cultural value.

In her still life photographs, Weems pays homage to Walker Evans's 1955 photoessay "Beauties of the Common Tool" [Fig. 3.22], as Susan Sterling notes in her essay for the 1993 retrospective catalogue.[54] Both series showcase utilitarian items as art objects with over-sized photographic prints, causing the viewer to see them in a new

---

[52] Kirsch, 15.

[53] H. L. Mencken, "Designations for Colored Folk," *American Speech* 19, no. 3 (1944): 166. You also find the term "sepia" referring to black people in Sinclair Lewis's *Kingsblood Royal* (New York: Random House, 1947); and in the March 18, 1944 edition of *The Amsterdam News*, in the article, "Miss America Contest Plans Given to Public" by Paul Davis.

[54] Susan Fisher Sterling, "Signifying: Photographs and Texts in the Work of Carrie Mae Weems," in *Carrie Mae Weems* (Washington, D.C.: National Museum of Women in the Arts, 1994): 30

manner. Yet while Evans remains concerned only with the aesthetics—celebrating the "elegance, candor, and purity" of the "good, clear 'undesigned' forms" of mass-produced goods—Weems pairs them with theoretical texts so that we do not simply see their beauty and practicality but also think about issues of politics and power.[55] Where Evans emphasizes the "swan-like flow" of the Swedish chain nose pliers [Fig. 3.22, top left image], Weems accentuates political and cultural work of these goods. She captions a worn typewriter with "An Informational System" [Fig. 3.23] and a small, plain book with "Some Theory" [Fig. 3.24]. These titles underscore the relationship between intellectual labor, the production of knowledge, and the idea that knowledge is a form of power.

In *Portrait of Myself as an Intellectual Revolutionary,* Weems emphasizes the fundamental role of the mental and artistic labor to radical action, something that she returns to in *And 22 Million* with the quotes from radical scholars and activists and photographs like *An Informational System* and *Some Theory*. In *22 Million*, the images and texts are more than the sum of their parts.

By merging radical politics with Evans's modernist aesthetics, *And 22 Million* repurposes the 1930s and 1940s photoessay for the 1990s.[56] Even the long title echoes this earlier format with its reference to Richard Wright and Edwin Rosskam's *12 Million Black Voices*.[57] As Wright and Rosskam's work calls for racial equality, so does *And 22*

---

[55] Walker Evans, "Beauties of the Common Tool," *Fortune*, July 1955, p. 103.

[56] Sterling, "Signifying," 30.

[57] See Richard Wright, *12 Million Black Voices* (New York: Basic Books, 2008 [1941]). Given the date of its publication, this work reflects Wright's concerns with the U.S.'s focus on oppression and prejudice in Europe with the advent of WWII while still ignoring the oppression and hatred (legal and extralegal) in our own nation. His work—like the *Pittsburgh Courier*'s Double V campaign, Jacob Lawrence's *War* series, and Horace Pippin's *Victory*—advocates for equality for African Americans in the context of

Million Very Tired and Very Angry People.[58] Furthermore, the title also recalls Malcolm X's speech at the June 1964 rally of the Organization of Afro-American Unity (OAAU), which he founded shortly after a trip to Ghana and his departure from the Nation of Islam. In this speech he lays out the aims of the new organization, specifically to work with the twenty-two million black Americans for freedom and independence "by any means necessary."[59] By recalling these moments in African American history, Weems stresses the connection between art and political action against racism.

But the title also points toward the long delay in this fight for justice. The twenty-two million people in Weems's title are not just voices. They are *very tired* and *very angry*, recalling what Fannie Lou Hamer said in a December 1964 speech: "For three hundred years, we've given them time. And I've been tired so long, now I'm sick and tired of being sick and tired, and we want a change."[60] In *And 22 Million Very Tired and Very Angry People*, they are not just sick and tired, but angry as well.

Several of the photographs make direct connections to the long history of the fight for equality for African Americans. *A Song to Sing* [Fig. 3.25], for example, shows

---

the American response to European anti-Semitism. For more on the 1940s context of this photoessay, see Dan Shiffman, "Richard Wright's '12 Million Black Voices' and World War II-era Civic Nationalism," *African American Review* 41, no. 3 (2007): 443-58.

[58] Weems acknowledges the centrality of this photoessay in multiple sources. See Kirsch, "Carrie Mae Weems," 9; and Zan Dubin, "Black and Wright : The Personal and the Political Sides of Carrie Mae Weems Find Forums at UCI," *Los Angeles Times*, October 10, 1991.

[59] Malcolm X, *By Any Means Necessary: Speeches, Interviews, and a Letter by Malcolm X* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1970), pp. 35.

[60] Fannie Lou Hamer, "I'm Sick and Tired of Being Sick and Tired," in *The Speeches of Fannie Lou Hamer: To Tell It Like It Is*, ed. Maegan Parker (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2011), 62.

the hymn "On Jordan's Stormy Banks I Stand," as arranged and performed by the Simmons-Akers Singers, an African American gospel trio of the 1940s and 1950s.[61] With its lyrics of longing for the Promised Land, Weems's use of this particular song recalls the role of spirituals as a source of hope and demonstration of longing during slavery. Likewise, *A Bell to Ring* [Fig. 3.26] shows us a small bell that recalls the appropriation of the Liberty Bell as a symbol of the abolitionist movement.[62] Both photographs refer to the antislavery activism of the nineteenth century and further recall Hamer's statement that change has been a long time coming.

This combination of antiracist activism with the 1930s and 1940s photographic practice of the photoessay is the heart of *22 Million*. Like the earlier phototexts, it serves as a visual reminder of difference and inequality. In the wake of the Great Depression, works like *You Have Seen Their Faces* (1937) by Erskine Caldwell and Margaret Bourke-White, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941) by Evans and James Agee, and *12 Million*

---

[61] While this hymn was originally written in 1787 by Samuel Stennett, a white Scottish man, it resonates with black gospel singers—as evidenced by its adaptation by the Simmons-Akers Singers—because of its references to the Promised Land, a common theme in African American spirituals.

[62] Two mid-nineteenth-century antislavery giftbooks, or literary annuals, made direct connections between the Liberty Bell and the abolitionist movement: the Female Anti-Slavery Society of Boston's *Liberty Bell* (1839-1858) and the Ladies Anti-Slavery Society of Providence's *Liberty Chimes* (1845). Also, at the opening ceremony of the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture, President Obama and others rang the Freedom Bell of First Baptist Church in Williamsburg, Virginia. See Ralph Thompson, "The Liberty Bell and Other Anti-Slavery Gift-Books," *The New England Quarterly* 7, no. 1 (1934): 154–68; Leslie J. Harris, "Motherhood, Race, and Gender: The Rhetoric of Women's Antislavery Activism in the Liberty Bell Giftbooks," *Women's Studies in Communication* 32, no. 3 (October 1, 2009): 293–319; Erin Blakemore, "Historic Bell Helps Ring in New African American History Museum," Smithsonian, accessed February 12, 2018, https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smithsonian-institution/historic-bell-helps-ring-new-african-american-history-museum-180960545/.

Black Voices (1941) by Wright and Rosskam combined image and text to bring awareness of the crisis of economic and racial disparities to the cultured elite. While each are left-leaning projects that pair documentary photography with literature, the books take different approaches to picturing inequality. Wright and Rosskam's work offers the strongest political critique, while Evans and Agee and Bourke-White and Caldwell have often been contrasted for their perceived differences in realism versus aestheticism.[63] Likewise, Weems uses her images and texts to remind the viewer of social inequality. But her work does not end there—*22 Million* uses its images and texts to spur radical action.

Unlike the photoessays of Wright, Rosskam, or Bourke-White and Caldwell, however, Weems does not employ a narrative format. Instead, she pairs the images with short captions and then places them in the room with banners printed with quotes from theoretical and literary works. These bits of text invite the viewer to make the connections between them. The photographs and banners of *22 Million* are like an unbound book: the viewer creates his own order from the separate parts.

Nevertheless, Weems forces connections between them. For instance, in another reference to Malcolm X's OAAU speech, the artist captions a photograph of a wooden rolling pin resting on the warm monochromatic background with the title *By Any Means Necessary* [Fig. 3.27]. He uses the phrase "by any means necessary" nearly twenty times in the speech, notably when he declares the goals of the organization: "That's our motto. We want freedom by any means necessary. We want justice by any

[63] See also James C. Curtis and Sheila Grannen, "Let Us Now Appraise Famous Photographs: Walker Evans and Documentary Photography," *Winterthur Portfolio* 15, no. 1 (1980): 1-23; and Winfried Fluck, "Poor like Us: Poverty and Recognition in American Photography," *Amerikastudien / American Studies* 55, no. 1 (2010): 63-93.

means necessary. We want equality by any means necessary," and later when he says, "We declare our right on this earth to be a man, to be a human being, to be respected as a human being, to be given the rights of a human being in this society, on this earth, in this day, which we intend to bring into existence by any means necessary."[64] By connecting the image of a rolling pin with the banners of quotes by people like Malcolm X, Weems connects the structural inequalities that marginalize racial minorities and women and calls for action against those imbalances.

As a domestic tool, the rolling pin has gendered implications—ones that have been satirized in for over a century. It is a domestic weapon, the choice of beleaguered wives in popular culture, from suffragette campaigns to Andy Capp comics. The women wielding the rolling pins in these cartoons assert their power using the only tools available to them, the tools of the home.

But the American kitchen, particularly in the South, historically has been the realm of black servants. Weems relies on the trope of the black mammy here, as she did in *American Icons*. By pairing it with the call to action "By Any Means Necessary," Weems reclaims both the rolling pin and the space of the kitchen for the radical cause. Instead of being wielded by an obedient mammy in the kitchen, however, this rolling pin is a tool of revolution. The shifting referents of the rolling pin and their relationship to

[64] Malcom X, *By Any Means Necessary*, 1992 edition (New York: Pathfinder, 1970), 37 and 56. Some scholars believe that Malcolm appropriated this motto from Jean-Paul Sartre's *Dirty Hands* play where he writes, "I was not the one to invent lies: they were created in a society divided by class and each of us inherited lies when we were born. It is not by refusing to lie that we will abolish lies: it is by eradicating class *by any means necessary*" (original in French). Malcolm X was taught French by his Grenadian mother and had some of Sartre's works in his personal library. See Hisham Aidi, "The Music of Malcolm X," *The New Yorker*, February 28, 2015, https://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/the-music-of-malcolm-x.

the text are able to empower the object and mark it as revolutionary despite its previously humble context.

Weems's use of excerpts and quotes corresponds to Glenn Ligon's contemporaneous 1991-1993 work *Notes on the Margin of the Black Book* [Fig. 3.28] which explores the controversy and afterlife of Robert Mapplethorpe's collection of portraits of black men, *Black Book* from 1986. Coming only two years after the Jesse Helms and National Endowment for the Arts censorship scandal,[65] *Notes on the Margin* benefitted from the vast amounts of discourse that surrounded Mapplethorpe's work in the late 1980s and early 1990s. After rejecting direct intervention in his own handwriting on the pages of the book as too personal, Ligon delved into the archive and went out into the world to gather others' reactions to the *Black Book*. He used the comments he collected from the models in the photographs and strangers on the street alongside quotations from academics such as Stuart Hall and Henry Louis Gates, Jr.; vitriol from members of the religious right; formal commentary from curators and art

[65] In 1989, the U.S. Congress, and in particular Senator Jesse Helms, attacked the National Endowment for the Arts over its funding blasphemous or homoerotic artwork. That scandal, which centered on artists such as Mapplethorpe and Andres Serrano, resulted in the Corcoran Gallery of Art canceling an exhibition of Mapplethorpe's photography and the unsuccessful prosecution of the Contemporary Art Center in Cincinnati, Ohio, on charges of obscenity. The censorship scandal changed the mind of many critics who up to that point had condemned *Black Book* (particularly those who identified as black and/or gay). See Douglas Crimp, "Photographs at the End of Modernism," in *On the Museum's Ruins*, 2-42 (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1993); and Kobena Mercer, "Reading Racial Fetishism: The Photographs of Robert Mapplethorpe," in *Welcome to the Jungle: New Positions in Black Cultural Studies*, 171-219 (New York and London: Routledge, 1994).

historians; and quotes from Mapplethorpe.[66] Each remark, whether or not they specifically refer to Mapplethorpe's work, provides context for Ligon's intervention.

When *Notes on the Margin* is installed in a gallery, the artist hangs the photographs in two rows in the order that they appear in *Black Book*. The viewer then progresses through the artwork as he would if her were looking at the original book, except that in between the two rows hang small pages with the collected quotations. The result is a collection of reactions and commentary that moves between the scholarly and personal.

While *Notes on the Margin of the Black Book* uses the pairing of image and text as a critique of the simultaneous eroticization and erasure of black gay men, *And 22 Million Very Tired and Very Angry People* uses the combination to call its viewer to action. This is in part due to Weems's choice of texts. Some are quite direct in asserting the need for every person to work together toward equality. For instance, one of the banners is printed with a quote from civil rights activist Fannie Lou Hamer:

> …I say now, if the white folks fight for thyself, and the black folk fight for thyself, we gonna crumble apart… There's white that suffer, there's Indian people that suffer, there's Mexican American people that suffer, there's Chinese people that suffer, and I'm perfectly willing to make this country what it have to be. We gonna have to fight these battles TOGETHER… You know a lot of people say, well, we're different, but we're no different!!! There's white people that's decent, just like there's Black people that's decent. Out of the best, there's some bad, and out of the worst, there's some good…[67]

---

[66] Scott Rothkopf, "Glenn Ligon: AMERICA," in *Glenn Ligon: AMERICA* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 2011), 35-36.

[67] Banner text as printed, including ellipses and emphasis, in Carrie Mae Weems, *And 22 Million Very Tired and Very Angry People* (San Francisco: San Francisco Art Institute, 1992), n. p.

On another she quotes Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*, "Henceforward, the interests of one will be the interests of all, for in concrete fact everyone will be discovered by the troops, everyone will be massacred—or everyone will be saved. The motto 'look out for yourself,' the atheist's method of salvation, is in this context forbidden."[68] This chorus of voices on the banners from different disciplines and backgrounds—philosopher, activist, and poet alike—represents visually the call for collective action throughout the work.

Before entering art school, Weems worked with grassroots Marxist organizations as well as with Anna Halprin's politically-minded San Francisco Dancer's Workshop.[69] With both the banners and images of *And 22 Million*, Weems calls upon that radical experience with leftist political action. The banners themselves are red and white, recalling both the American flag and communism. More directly, the series includes a pair of images titled *A Hammer* [Fig. 3.29] along with *And a Sickle* [Fig. 3.30]. These two images closely resemble Evans's *Beauties of the Common Tool* photoessay with their iconic depiction of humble tools. And yet these tools also serve as representations of the Communist International movement. The hammer and sickle symbol was adopted by communists during the Russian Revolution to symbolize the union of urban industrial laborers (the hammer) and agricultural workers of the rural peasantry (the sickle).

At the 1991 exhibition at the New Museum's WorkSpace gallery—the inaugural showing of *22 Million—Hammer* and *Sickle* were transformed from a diptych into a

---

[68] Franz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 1963) 47.

[69] Kirsch, "Carrie Mae Weems," 9; and Kathryn E. Delmez, "Introduction," in *Carrie Mae Weems: Three Decades of Photography and Video*, ed. by Kathryn E. Delmez, 1–9 (New Haven and London: Frist Center for the Visual Arts in association with Yale University Press, 2012) 1.

triptych with the addition of a photograph titled *A Hot Spot in a Corrupt World* [Fig. 3.31].[70] This image of a round globe confronts the viewer with the key geography and ports-of-call for the Atlantic slave trade with views of the Atlantic Ocean, the Gulf of Mexico, the Caribbean Sea, all of South America, the Eastern seaboard of North America, and most of Africa. Playing with the words of her title, the coast of West Africa—the primary point of departure for slave ships bound for the Americas—is obscured with glare from the bright studio light: a hot spot on the photographic print and, as Weems tells us, for the forced diaspora of Africans. United opposition to inequality is central to *22 Million*'s call for collective action, and is emphasized by the prominent placement of *Hammer* and *Sickle* and *Hot Spot* in its early exhibitions.[71]

The New Museum's installation of *22 Million* underscored the connection between theory and cultural-historical context by pairing *An Informational System*, the typewriter image, with *A Precise Moment in Time* [Fig. 3.32], a photograph of a small bedside alarm clock.[72] By connecting these two images, the installation directs the

---

[70] The group of *Hot Spot, Hammer, And Sickle* was the lone set of three photographs (all others were in pairs), and they hung in the center of the main wall. In the catalogue for the 1991 show at the San Francisco Art Institute, *Hot Spot* is the opening image. In the same book, *A Hammer And a Sickle* again forms a triptych, this time with *By Any Means Necessary*.

[71] *And 22 Million Very Tired and Very Angry People* was included in three solo shows of Weems's work in its first two years: the show at the New Museum for Contemporary Art (February 16-April 7, 1991), "Carrie Mae Weems: Two Works" at UC Irvine Fine Arts Gallery (with *Kitchen Table Series*, October-November, 1991), and the Adaline Kent Award Exhibition at the San Francisco Art Institute (April 2-May 2, 1992). Both the New Museum and San Francisco Art Institute exhibitions contained only this series. A catalogue was made for the latter, see Carrie Mae Weems, *And 22 Million Very Tired and Very Angry People* (San Francisco: San Francisco Art Institute, 1992).

[72] WorkSpace was a gallery within the On View program, which ran in the 1980s and 1990s and was designed to showcase emerging artists and new work that had not yet been shown in New York. WorkSpace specifically was used for three- to four-week

viewer's thoughts on collective action toward the current moment.[73] The only banner that uses text written by Weems ends with the following sentences: "At that moment we all knew that Cooke had been seriously on the money when he said, 'a change is gonna come' and that Foucault was dead wrong. If this ain't a unique moment, what is it!!!" Here the artist refers to Sam Cooke's final song, "A Change Is Gonna Come," released posthumously in 1964.[74] The lyrics of this classic Civil Rights Era anthem begin with the refrain: "I was born by the river in a little tent/Oh and just like the river I've been running ev'r since/It's been a long time, a long time coming/But I know a change gonna come, oh yes it will." When she says that "Cooke had been seriously on the money" and "Foucault was dead wrong," Weems tells us that the popular singer has shown up the poststructuralist theorist.

Together with *A Precise Moment in Time*, Weems's text argues that now is the time for change. It is the combination of text and image that forms the main work of *22 Million*. By pairing common household objects and scholarly texts, she transforms both. The texts are brought into everyday life, and the objects become tools for the revolution.

And 22 Million combines theory, activism, and art. By using common tools and other objects like a rolling pin, globe, and a typewriter, Weems affirms that everyone has

---

installations of site-specific and immersive exhibitions. See https://archive.newmuseum.org/series/1539.

[73] New Museum curator Laura Trippi relates the installation with the then-ongoing First Gulf War, in which, she says, "it would seem that securing cross-national class relations has taken precedence over all domestic considerations, just at the point that growing communities of color have begun to affirm their share in the population of the U.S." See Laura Trippi, *And 22 Million Very Tired and Very Angry People*, exhibition brochure (New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1991).

[74] Cooke died on December 11, 1964, and "A Change Is Gonna Come" was released on December 22, 1964.

a role in political and social reform. The chorus of voices in the banners from poets, academics, and activists asserts that the time for revolution is now. *And 22 Million Very Tired and Very Angry People* transforms ordinary objects by connecting them to the words of writers and activists so that they become weapons for change.

Conclusion

From 1988 to 1991, Weems created radical art that questioned the structure and consequences of power in American culture. *Portrait of Myself as an Intellectual Revolutionary* declares her work to be in step with the larger radical tradition. This self-portrait argues for the alignment of activism centered on race, class, and gender with the three posters hanging on the wall behind the artist at her desk. Weems continues this work as an intellectual revolutionary with *And 22 Million*, *Then What*, and *American Icons*. These works question the inequalities of American society and history while investigating the role of images, things, and words in it. It is a radical combination, and one that she introduces in *Portrait of Myself as an Intellectual Revolutionary*.

In each of these three bodies of work, Weems examines the connections between cultural objects, race, and power: *American Icons* elevates racist decorative items to the status of icons to reveal the role of racism in American culture; *Then What* probes the ways that folklore has been a means of resistance and survival for African Americans; and *22 Million* applies radical political theory to everyday objects to spur collective action against inequality. These works expose the social structures that regulate the daily lives of black people in the United States. Furthermore, they point toward the dynamics of power that are inherent to those confining structures.

When taken together, these artworks show us not only how people are denied

agency by society, but they also tell us how to empower ourselves when society refuses to do so. In *American Icons*, we see stereotypes inscribed into seemingly innocuous objects, but we see power in the act of contextualizing and reclaiming them. By turning her camera toward the salt- and peppershakers in the kitchen, Weems forces them to be seen. In *Then What*, Weems depicts the conditions that confine people to a subordinate status—as we saw in the *Jim, If You Choose* photograph alongside the "Viola Lee Blues" lyrics—while also demonstrating the way around them with the healing conjure ritual in the opening section and the altar and story of John the Conqueror in another. And finally, in *And 22 Million Very Tired and Very Angry People*, Weems connects disparities of race, class, and gender in both the photographs and the texts. All the while using each of these themes to promote a call for collective action against inequality of any type.

Each of these series critiques American culture. Even more, they intervene against the consequences of power and explode the limits of tradition. Starting with *Portrait of Myself as an Intellectual Revolutionary*, Weems positions her work as part of a larger radical tradition. *American Icons, And 22 Million,* and *Then What* not only give insight into society, but provides new models for us to live by.

Epilogue

> *It's assumed that autobiography is key, because I so often use myself, my own of experience—limited as it is at times—as the starting point. 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.* ~ Carrie Mae Weems[1]

In each of the series investigated here, Weems questions the role of power in American society. She explores how facets of identity—like color, gender, and economic status—are restricted by social structures and how we can push against those restrictions. These are not questions that she abandons in her work of the 1990s and 2000s, rather they are ones she returns to again and again. Many of the works I explore here provide a base for Weems's later art. Not only does she remake and reuse the photographs of her early series, but the ideas, like that of diaspora and modernism, found in these series are the initial incarnations of her career-long exploration.

One way that she returns to these early works is by reusing and adapting photographs into new series. *Then What: Photographs and Folklore* (1990) incorporates photographs that are more commonly associated with *Colored People* (1989-90) and *Kitchen Table Series* (1990). In a trifold spread that explores heterosexual relationships, we see both *Untitled (Man smoking)* [Fig. E.1] and *Untitled (Woman and phone)* [Fig. E.2] alongside blues lyrics and stories. While *Then What* and *Kitchen Table* both blend these two images with narratives and lyrics, they take on a

[1] Dawoud Bey, "Carrie Mae Weems," *Bomb* 108 (Summer 2009), http://bombsite.com/issues/108/articles/3307.

different valence in the series and artist's book. *Then What* pairs them with a narrative that tells how women can use conjure to get and keep a man. *Kitchen Table*, on the contrary, connects the photographs with a story of a particular woman who is skeptical of monogamy [Fig. E.3].

Another spread in *Then What* incorporates the photographs and labels she used in *Colored People*. Instead of arranging them in triptychs of one single image with one of the three words in the name pasted under the photographs, here Weems placed the different portraits in a long line on each side of the paper with a running list of the skin tones at the bottom.

Weems also remade *Colored People* for a site-specific installation in the lobby of the United Nations, first commissioned by Foundation for Art and Preservation in Embassies. Since 1963, the U.S. Department of State has embarked a public form of diplomacy with the Art in Embassies program,[2] and they have included Weems's work in several of these displays, including the United States Mission to the United Nations, the fiftieth anniversary celebration of the program, and a handful of U.S. Embassies in Africa, including in Bamako, Mali; Monrovia, Liberia; and Antananarivo, Madagascar.[3]

---

[2] President John F. Kennedy formalized this program a decade after the Museum of Modern Art first envisioned it. According to the State Department's website, "Today, [Art in Embassies] is a public-private partnership engaging over 20,000 participants globally, including artists, museums, galleries, universities, and private collectors, and encompasses over 200 venues in 189 countries." The embassies frequently use the works to engage with local artists and make connections between the United States and local cultures. Weems's *Africa*, *African Jewels*, and the *Eatonville Project* have been used particularly for exhibitions in African embassies. For more information, see http://art.state.gov/about.aspx.

[3] To see a running list of all artists who have participated in the program as well as which art works are on display in which U. S. Embassies, see http://art.state.gov/. For a popular media take on the Art in Embassies Program and Weems's participation in it, see Kevin Conley, "State Craft," *Town & Country*, April 2016; and Hillary Clinton, "The

In her reworking of *Colored People*, *Untitled (Colored People Grid)* [2009-2010, Fig. E.4], uses the color-tinted portraits of children without the textual labels.[4] Instead, they are displayed in a grid interspersed with square panels of varying colors.

Weems uses the grid in this version of *Colored People* to dissolve the distinctions that the captions of the original emphasized.[5] With the grid, the viewer sees connection between the portraits despite their varied hues. We are able to see their individuality and diversity while recognizing their commonalities as well. This is precisely what makes *Colored People Grid* work in diplomatic settings, especially the lobby of the United Nations—an organization whose main focus is promoting international cooperation.

Similarly, Weems reinterprets the polaroids of *And 22 Million* in *Who, What, When, Where* [1998, Fig. E.5]. In the later instantiation, Weems uses the same images but with different captions. Instead of "An Informational System," the caption for the typewriter is "Who"; instead of "Some Theory," the small book is labeled "What"; instead of "A Precise Moment in Time," the alarm clock says "When"; and instead of "A Hot Spot," the label for the globe reads "Where." Rather than encouraging the viewers into collective action, as she did with *22 Million*, *Who, What, When, Where* confronts

---

Diplomacy of Art," *Vanity Fair*, February 2013, http://www.vanityfair.com/news/politics/2013/02/hillary-clinton-art-embassies.

[4] This version in turn has been repeated (with variations) and can be found at other institutions such as the Kemper Art Museum of Washington University in St. Louis. Allison Unruh, "Spotlight Essay: Carrie Mae Weems | Kemper Art Museum," September 2016, http://www.kemperartmuseum.wustl.edu/node/11590.

[5] Unruh.

them with questions. She wants to know, Who will participate in the revolution? What will they be fighting for? When will it start? And finally, where will it happen?[6]

But more than just remaking or reusing her photographs from these earlier series, Weems also reexamines certain themes from them, such as the Afro-Atlantic diaspora. With *Then What* and *22 Million*, the artist addresses concepts of diaspora from an African American perspective. In *Then What*, she explores black folklore, particularly conjure or hoodoo, a New World practice that blends Christianity and African religious traditions by incorporating altars, candles, water, and other natural elements. In the opening spread [Fig. 3.13], we see Weems performing a hoodoo ritual in front of the camera. Another section pairs the myth of High John the Conqueror—an African prince sold into slavery who out wits his masters—with photographs of an altar and water, which are important aspects of conjure ritual [Fig. 3.14]. In *And 22 Million*, a polaroid of a globe highlights the coast of West Africa [Fig. 3.31], a critical point on the Black Atlantic triangular slave trade. With these early nods toward religious culture and the slave trade, Weems begins to explore diaspora through the lens of African American history and culture.

In the three years that followed *And 22 Million*, Weems addressed the Afro-Atlantic diaspora even more explicitly with her series *Sea Islands* (1991-1992) and *Africa* (1993). The former visually explores the Sea Islands, a group of islands off the Carolinas, Georgia, and northern Florida where thousands of West Africans were brought after their journey on the Middle Passage. Many descendants of slaves

---

[6] Kathryn E. Delmez, ed., *Carrie Mae Weems: Three Decades of Photography and Video* (New Haven and London: Frist Center for the Visual Arts in association with Yale University Press, 2012), 170.

remained on the isolated islands and cultivated a unique culture—called Gullah or Geechee—with African, European, and American elements, an intersection that Weems examines in this series.[7] In fact, Weems again reuses the conjure photographs from *Then What* in *Sea Islands* [Fig. E.6]. In addition to the religious and ritual reference, the artist integrates photographs and text panels that trace the connections between the names for things such as peanuts in West African languages and the creole dialect of the Sea Islands [Fig. E.7]. By connecting Gullah culture to Africa in her images and text, Weems explores the hybridity of her own heritage as a black American along with the specific resistance of the Gullah people in the construction of their own hybrid culture. Her list in one of the text panels—Gola Angola Gulla Gullah Geechee—"performs a historical ellipsis, rhythmically connecting the region's indigenous speech to the West African lands from which the inhabitants' ancestors traveled, as slaves, in the 17th and 18th centuries," Kate Linker argues.[8]

Sea Islands also includes a set of ceramic plates inscribed with texts that start with the phrase "WENT LOOKING FOR AFRICA." One plate [Fig. E.8] says,

> WENT LOOKING FOR AFRICA
> and found Africa

---

[7] Gullah and Geechee are separate, though interrelated, cultures along the United States eastern seaboard. Though the names are often used interchangeably, Gullah specifically refers to the more northern population, mostly in the Carolinas, while Geechee refers to those from Georgia and northern Florida. Furthermore, the Geechee people often divide themselves into "Saltwater Geechee" and "Freshwater Geechee," based on their distance from the ocean. Interview with St. Simons Island African American Coalition, June 2015. See also Kendra Hamilton, "The Taste of the Sun: Okra Soup in the Geechee Tradition," *Callaloo* 30, no. 1 (2007): 75–86; Jingle Davis, "Hog Hammock," *The Atlanta Journal*, November 10, 1996; Herb Frazier, "Scholars Differ on Gullah Origin," *The Post and Courier*, February 20, 1997; Jack Moore, "The Painful Path from Slavery," *The Tampa Tribune*, February 6, 1997.

[8] Kate Linker, "Went Looking for Africa: Carrie Mae Weems," *Artforum* 31 (February 1993): 79.

in a wrought iron gate
the design of
the master house
in the shape of a
sweet-grass basket
in a round
smoke house

With this text, Weems connects the cultural and artistic productions of enslaved blacks and their descendants back to African origins. These plates serve as direct connections between *Sea Islands* and her next series, *Africa*, where she also produces inscribed ceramic plates that start with the phrase "LANDED IN AFRICA."[9] In this series, Weems continues to make global, diasporic connections. For instance, one of her plates from *Africa* [Fig. E.9, lower left] says,

LANDED IN AFRICA
and found Mandingo
doing the Harlem Shuffle
down Lumumba Square

Here, Weems evokes the interchange between black culture with each line: Mandingo is either a reference to a black man in a relationship with a white woman (as in the 1975 film and also a 2010 series by Weems, both of the same name) or a member of a specific West African people group who speak a dialect of Mande; the Harlem Shuffle is an African American dance; and finally Lumumba Square is a large central plaza in Bamako, Mali, named for Patrice Lumumba, the first Prime Minister of the Democratic Republic of Congo and proponent of Pan-Africanism.

[9] Kristine McKenna, "The Evolution of a Tough Cookie : Racism, Sexism and Classism Permeate Carrie Mae Weems' Photographic Palette," *Los Angeles Times*, June 27, 1993, http://articles.latimes.com/1993-06-27/entertainment/ca-7582_1_artist-carrie-mae-weems.

Weems expands her exploration of diaspora in her *Roaming* (2005) to include Europe. Made during her residency at the American Academy in Rome,[10] Weems found herself contemplating the relationship between Europe and Africa:

> The world met on the Mediterranean, not on the Mississippi—these things are linked in my mind. From here, Africa is just one giant step away. Spain is closer than Savannah, Rome closer than Rhode Island. Mark Antony lost his power languishing in the arms of Cleopatra; Mussolini established Italian colonies in Egypt; the Moors and Africans controlled the waters of Spain, leaving their mark in the Alhambra. Money was minted here, not in Maine. See what I mean? I'm not here to eat the pasta. I'm trying in my humble way connect the dots, to confront history. Democracy and colonial expansion are rooted here.[11]

In *Roaming*, Weems inserts herself—in the persona that she has become known for and calls her "muse"—in front of the camera, acting as a guide who orients us toward ideas of history and power. In *A Broad and Expansive Sky—Ancient Rome* [Fig. E.10], the muse stands in front of the Mediterranean Sea, facing the direction of Africa. Her back is to the camera and she uses her body to direct the gaze and thoughts of the viewer toward the continent.

Museums (2006), a related project to *Roaming*, places Weems's muse figure in front of major European and American art institutions like the Louvre [Fig. E.11] and Tate Modern [Fig. E.12]. As with *Roaming*, Weems uses her body as a vehicle for pointing the viewer to think about power, history, and social structure. This time, however, her critique is specific to the art world. By placing her muse persona in front of major art institutions, Weems provides an embodied critique of the absence of other bodies like hers within the art world.

---

[10] Delmez, *Carrie Mae Weems: Thirty Years of Photography and Video*, 220.

[11] Bey, "Carrie Mae Weems."

Weems takes on modernism, specifically minimalism, in *Beacon* (2005). This series, commissioned by the Cultural Foundation of Beacon, New York, examines the changing landscape of the town, which in the twentieth century transitioned from a thriving industrial site to economic decline to revitalization as a contemporary art center with the arrival of DIA:Beacon.[12] Weems places the muse in various places around the town and in front of the institution's notable works. Not only does the muse's presence signal us to contemplate the shifting identity of the place and social and economic fallout from these changes, but it also directs us to contemplate the social power of the art world. When she pictures the muse in front of the minimalist artwork that Dia is known for, as she does in *Untitled (Yellow Painting)* [Fig. E.13], Weems guides us to contemplate, again, the absence of women and people of color and the glorification of the man-of-genius in the history of art and minimalism in particular. As Adrienne Edwards points out, in the past forty years Dia has only shown the work of two black artists.[13]

Beacon and *Museums* both continue the artist's intervention in the hierarchy of the art world that we saw in *Colored People*. In the latter series, Weems used colored grids and racial names to expand the parameters of modernism. It racializes social hierarchies and power structures, pointing toward the interrelation of race and modernism. *Beacon* and *Museums*, meanwhile, gesture toward the absence of the work of black artists and the depiction of black bodies in canonical institutions of the art world.

---

[12] Delmez, *Carrie Mae Weems: Thirty Years of Photography and Video*, 212.

[13] Adrienne Edwards, "Carrie Mae Weems," *Aperture*, no. 221 (Winter 2015): 103.

The exclusion of black people is also at the heart of Weems's artworks *Framed by Modernism* with African American painter Robert Colescott and *Not Manet's Type* (both 1997). The collaborative work with Colescott is a triptych of photographs paired with text that shows the painter in the foreground with the nude figure of Weems in the back corner in between large and small canvases [Fig. E.14]. The text that runs across the last two images says, "You framed the likes of me / & I framed you, but we were / both framed by modernism // & even though we knew better, / we continued that time honored / tradition of the artist and his model," declaring the difficulty of escaping constraints of modernism even when you intimately know the problems associated with it.

In *Not Manet's Type*, Weems again pairs photographs with texts that proffer a critical examination of modern art. The voyeuristic images show Weems in varying stages of undress through the reflection in a vanity mirror [Fig. E.15]. The second of the five images is captioned as follows: "It was clear, / I was not Manet's type / Picasso—who had a way / with women—only used me / & Duchamp never even considered me." With these words Weems laments the treatment of black women by the canonical modern painters. It's hard to know what is worse—Manet's dismissing, Picasso's use, or Duchamp's ignoring. But in the next image, Weems wryly states, "But it could have been worse / image my fate had / deKooning [*sic*] gotten / hold of me." The last caption provides a different model to follow, when it says, "I took a tip from Frida / who from her bed painted / incessantly—beautifully / while Diego / scaled the scaffolds / to the very top of the world." Here the artist looks instead to a female painter, Frida Kahlo, who was less famous than her husband, Diego Rivera, in her lifetime, but persisted and has since garnered more admiration.

In her work from the late 1970s through 1991, Weems laid the groundwork for her later explorations. The series that I explore in my earlier chapters—*Family Pictures and Stories, Ain't Jokin', Colored People, American Icons, Then What? Photographs and Folklore,* and *And 22 Million Very Tired and Very Angry People*—question the ways that power shapes culture. With these early works as her foundation, Weems's later works expand her examinations of power and society through the lenses of diaspora and modernism.

Figures

Figure 1.1
Mother with Children
From *Boardwalk, Santa Monica*
1980-1982
Silver gelatin print

Figure I.2
Weems dancing with San Francisco Dancers' Workshop
ca. 1971
Still from *Art in the Twenty-First Century* Season 5, Episode "Compassion," 2009, original filmmaker unknown

Figure I.3
Andres Serrano
Piss Christ
1987
Cibrachrome print

Figure I.4
Guerilla Girls
Relax Senator Helms, The Art World is Your Kind of Place!
1989
Screen print on paper

Figure 1.1
Installation of *Family Pictures and Stories* at the Frist Center for the Visual Arts in 2012
1978-1984
Silver gelatin prints with text and audio

Figure 1.2
Portrait of Frederick Douglass
ca. 1850
Daguerreotype

Figure 1.3
Advertisement for Madam C. J. Walker—Preparations
1920

Figure 1.4
Alice
From *Family Pictures and Stories*
1978-1984
Silver gelatin print

Figure 1.5
Wadsworth Jarrell
Black Family
1969
Acrylic on canvas

Figure 1.6
Carolyn Lawrence
Uphold Your Men
1971
Screenprint

Figure 1.7
Dad sorting and packing cow hides
From *Family Pictures and Stories*
1978-1984
Halftone print (originally silver gelatin print)

Figure 1.8
Momma at work
From *Family Pictures and Stories*
1978-1984
Silver gelatin print

Figure 1.9
Family Reunion
From *Family Pictures and Stories*
1978-1984
Silver gelatin print

Figure 1.10
Carrie Mae
From *Family Pictures and Stories*
1978-1984
Silver gelatin print

Figure 1.11
Installation view of “The Family of Man,” Museum of Modern Art
1955

Figure 1.12
Langston Hughes and Roy DeCarava
The Sweet Flypaper of Life
1955

Figure 1.13
Welcome Home
From *Family Pictures and Stories*
1978-1984
Silver gelatin print

Figure 1.14
Clarissa Sligh
Waiting on Daddy
1987
Van Dyke brown print

Figure 1.15
Jessie
From *Family Pictures and Stories*
1978-1984
Silver gelatin print

Figure 1.16
Pat Ward Williams
Ghosts that Smell Like Cornbread
1986
Mixed media

Figure 1.17
Son-Son
From *Family Pictures and Stories*
1978-1984
Silver gelatin print

Figure 1.18
Dad and Son-Son
From *Family Pictures and Stories*
1978-1984
Silver gelatin print

Figure 1.19
Mom and Dad with grandkids
From *Family Pictures and Stories*
1978-1984
Silver gelatin print

Figure 2.1
Installation view of *Ain't Jokin'* (top four works) at the Centro Andaluz de Arte Contemporáneo in Seville, Spain, 2010

Figure 2.2
Installation view of *Colored People* (far left) and *Ain't Jokin'* (middle right) at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, 2014

Figure 2.3
Portrait of Sojourner Truth
1864
Albumen silver print, *carte de visite*

Figure 2.4
Black Man Holding Watermelon
from *Ain't Jokin'*
1987-88
Silver Gelatin Print

Figure 2.5
Black Woman With Chicken
from *Ain't Jokin'*
1987-88
Silver Gelatin Print

Figure 2.6
Alden Fruit Vinegar
ca. 1880s
Trade card

Figure 2.7
F. W. Guerin
Untitled photograph
Ca. 1902
Geltin silver photograph

Figure 2.8
Little Rastus's idea of Grandpa in Heaven
ca. 1913
Halftone print

Figure 2.9
Group Material
Interior spreads of *Inserts*
1988

Figure 2.10
Weems with Group Material
Peaches, Liz, Tanikka, and Elaine
1988

Figure 2.11
What's a cross between an ape and a nigger?
from *Ain't Jokin'*
1987-88
Silver Gelatin Print

Figure 2.12
Installation views of *Ain't Jokin'* works with moveable plaque, Frist Center for the Visual Arts, 2012
What did Lincoln say after a drinking bout?
1987-88
Silver Gelatin Print

Figure 2.13
What's black on the inside, yellow on the outside and looks funny going over a cliff?
from *Ain't Jokin'*
1987-88
Silver Gelatin Print

Figure 2.14
Pat Ward Williams
Accused: Blowtorch, Padlock
1987
Window frame, paint, film

Figure 2.15
Lorna Simpson
Necklines
1989
Gelatin silver prints and engraved plastic plaques

Figure 2.16
Lorna Simpson
Untitled (Two Necklines)
1989
Gelatin silver prints and engraved plastic plaques

Figure 2.17
How do you get a nigger out of a tree?
from *Ain't Jokin'*
1987-88
Silver Gelatin Print

Figure 2.18
Golden Yella Girl
from *Colored People*
1989-90
Toned silver gelatin print with Prestype

Figure 2.19
Red Bone Boy
from *Colored People*
1989-90
Toned silver gelatin print with Prestype

Figure 2.20
Moody Blue Girl
from *Colored People*
1989-90
Toned silver gelatin print with Prestype

Figure 2.21
Magenta Colored Girl
from *Colored People*
1989-90
Toned silver gelatin print with Prestype

Figure 2.22
Adrian Piper
Colored People
1991
Artist's book

Figure 2.23
Byron Kim
Synecdoche
1991-present
Oil on plywood

Figure 3.1
Portrait of Myself as an Intellectual Revolutionary
1988
Gelatin Silver Print

Figure 3.2
Untitled (Letter Holder)
From *American Icons*
1988-89
Gelatin silver print

Figure 3.3
Untitled (Salt and Pepper Shaker)
From *American Icons*
1988-89
Gelatin silver print

Figure 3.4
Untitled (Orleans)
From *American Icons*
1988-89
Gelatin silver print

Figure 3.5
Jeff Donaldson
Aunt Jemima and the Pillsbury Doughboy
1963

Figure 3.6
Joe Overstreet
The New Aunt Jemima
1964

Figure 3.7
Betye Saar
The Liberation of Aunt Jemima
1972

Figure 3.8
Untitled (Ashtray)
From *American Icons*
1988-89
Gelatin silver print

Figure 3.9
Untitled (Lamp)
From *American Icons*
1988-89
Gelatin silver print

Figure 3.10
Album cover, “Famous Songs of Bert Williams,” 1940

Figure 3.11
Ode to Affirmative Action
Silver gelatin print and record
1989

Figure 3.12
"'The nigger must go' and 'The Chinese must go'"
Thomas Nast
September 13, 1879
Cartoon for *Harper's Weekly*

Figure 3.13
Then What? Photographs and Folklore
1990
Artist's book

Figure 3.14
Untitled Spread
From *Then What? Photographs and Folklore*
1990
Artist's book

Figure 3.15
Renée Stout
Fetish No. 2
1988
Mixed media

Figure 3.16
Trinity
Renée Stout
1992
Mixed media

Figure 3.17
My Altar/My Grandmother's Altar
Renée Stout
1992
Mixed media

Figure 3.18
Hat on Bed
From *Then What? Photographs and Folklore*
1990
Artist's book

Figure 3.19
Jim, If You Choose
From *Then What? Photographs and Folklore*
1990
Artist's book

Figure 3.20
Gary Simmons
Lineup
1993

Figure 3.21
Installation view from the New Museum of *And 22 Million Very Tired and Very Angry People*
Fifteen polaroid color prints with text printed on matting and fifteen red and white banners imprinted with text
1991

Figure 3.22
"Beauties of the Common Tool"
Walker Evans
1955

Figure 3.23
An Informational System
From *And 22 Million Very Tired and Very Angry People*
1991
Polaroid photograph

Figure 3.24
Some Theory
From *And 22 Million Very Tired and Very Angry People*
1991
Polaroid photograph

Figure 3.25
A Song to Sing
From *And 22 Million Very Tired and Very Angry People*
1991
Polaroid photograph

Figure 3.26
A Bell to Ring
From *And 22 Million Very Tired and Very Angry People*
1991
Polaroid photograph

Figure 3.27
By Any Means Necessary
From *And 22 Million Very Tired and Very Angry People*
1991
Polaroid photograph

Figure 3.28
Glenn Ligon
Notes on the Margin of the Black Book, installation shot
1991-93

Figure 3.29
A Hammer
From *And 22 Million Very Tired and Very Angry People*
1991
Polaroid photograph

Figure 3.30
And a Sickle
From *And 22 Million Very Tired and Very Angry People*
1991
Polaroid photograph

Figure 3.31
A Hot Spot in a Corrupt World
From *And 22 Million Very Tired and Very Angry People*
1991
Polaroid photograph

Figure 3.32
A Precise Moment in Time
From *And 22 Million Very Tired and Very Angry People*
1991
Polaroid photograph

Figure E.1
Untitled (Man smoking)
From *Kitchen Table Series*
1990
Silver gelatin print

Figure E.2
Untitled (Woman and phone)
From *Kitchen Table Series*
1990
Silver gelatin print

Figure E.3
Text panel 3
From *Kitchen Table Series*
1990
Screen print

Figure E.4
Untitled (Colored People Grid)
2009-10
Thirty-one screen-printed papers and eleven inkjet prints

Figure E.5
Who, What, When, Where
1998
Polaroid photographs with text

Figure E.6
Untitled
From *Sea Islands Series*
1991-1992
Silver gelatin prints and screen prints

Figure E.7
Untitled (Peanuts)
From *Sea Islands Series*
1991-1992
Silver gelatin prints and screen prints

Figure E.8
Untitled
From *Sea Islands Series*
1991-1992
Screen print ceramic plate

Figure E.9
Untitled
From *Africa*
1993
Screen print ceramic plates

Figure E.10
A Broad and Expansive Sky—Ancient Rome
From *Roaming*
2005
Digital chromogenic print

Figure E.11
Untitled (The Louvre)
From *Museums*
2006
Digital chromogenic print

Figure E.12
Untitled (Tate Modern)
From *Museums*
2006
Digital chromogenic print

Figure E.13
Untitled (Yellow Painting)
From *Beacon*
2005
Pigment ink print

Figure E.14
Framed by Modernism
1997
Silver gelatin prints and etched text on glass

Figure E.15
Not Manet's Type
1997
Pigment ink prints

Bibliography

Archives & Interviews

Curatorial object files, Frist Center for the Visual Arts, Nashville, Tennessee
Curatorial object files, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, California
Jock Reynolds
Carrie Mae Weems
Elizabeth Wylie

Primary and Secondary Sources

"A Salute to Black Photographers." *Ebony*, April 1973, 73–82.

"A Woman's Point of View: UC San Diego Art Exhibit Has Work by 7 Trailblazing Female Artists in La Jolla - La Jolla Light." Accessed February 28, 2018. http://www.lajollalight.com/art/sd-cm-ljl-seven-artists-20180131-story.html.

Agovino, Michael J. "Artist Carrie Mae Weems Talks Race, Gender, and Finally Getting the Recognition She Deserves." ELLE, November 20, 2013. http://www.elle.com/pop-culture/best/carrie-mae-weems-profile.

Aidi, Hisham. "The Music of Malcolm X." *The New Yorker*, February 28, 2015. https://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/the-music-of-malcolm-x.

Alexander-Floyd, Nikol G. "'We Shall Have Our Manhood:' Black Macho, Black Nationalism, and the Million Man March." *Meridians* 3, no. 2 (2003): 171–203.

Ault, Julie, ed. *Show and Tell: A Chronicle of Group Material*. London: Four Corners Books, 2010.

Auslander, Philip. "Carrie Mae Weems: ACA Gallery of the Savannah College of Art and Design." *Exhibit* 47, no. 2 (October 2008): 389–90.

Baker, Houston A., Jr. *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989.

Balken, Deborah Bricker. "Carrie Mae Weems at P.P.O.W." *Art in America* 81 (June 1993).

Barden, Lane. "Hidden Witness and Carrie Mae Weems Reacts to Hidden Witness at J. Paul Getty Museum." *Malibu, Calif; Exhibits* 26 (June 1995): 25–26.

Beebe, Christi. "Social Responsibility Art Exhibit Scheduled to Open This Thursday." *The Tufts Daily*, March 31, 1993.

Benner, Susan. "A Conversation with Carrie Mae Weems." *Artweek*, May 7, 1992, 4–5.

Berkovitch, Ellen. "Carrie Mae Weems: Newcomb Art Gallery, Tulane University." *Exhibit* 42, no. 8 (April 2004): 163–163.

Bey, Dawoud. "Carrie Mae Weems." *Bomb* 108 (Summer 2009). http://bombmagazine.com/issues/108/articles/3307.

———. "Interview: Dawoud Bey and Carrie Mae Weems." In *Class Pictures*, 144–53. New York: Aperture, 2007.

Bhabha, Homi K., 1949-. "Black Male: Representations of Masculinity in Contemporary American Art: Whitney Museum of American Art, New York." *Artforum International* 33, no. 6 (February 1995): 86–87, 110.

Bourassa, Beth-Vincent. "Slandered Sisters: The Subjugation and Stereotypes of African-American Women in the Photographic Work of Carrie Mae Weems and Lorna Simpson." M.A. Thesis, Rhode Island College, 2002.

Bowen, Will. "A Woman's Point of View: UC San Diego Art Exhibit Has Work by 7 Trailblazing Female Artists in La Jolla." lajollalight.com. Accessed March 3, 2018. http://www.lajollalight.com/art/sd-cm-ljl-seven-artists-20180131-story.html.

Braswell, Kristin. "Artist Carrie Mae Weems on 30 Years of Genius." *Ebony,* February 5, 2014. http://www.ebony.com/entertainment-culture/artist-carrie-mae-weems-on-30-years-of-genius-999.

Brunvand, Jan Harold. *The Study of American Folklore: An Introduction*. 2nd ed. New York: W.W. Norton & Company Inc., 1978.

Budick, Ariella. "Carrie Mae Weems, Guggenheim, New York—review." *Financial Times*, January 29, 2014. http://www.ft.com/cms/s/2/86fd7cbc-8816-11e3-8afa-00144feab7de.html#axzz2rzQcIaOX.

Burch, Peggy. "Artist Carrie Mae Weems Tackles Race and Gender in Powerful Portraits." *The Commercial Appeal*, March 18, 2001, Go Memphis edition, sec. Go Play Memphis.

Butler, Cornelia H., and Lisa Gabrielle Mark, eds. *WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution*. Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art Los Angeles and The MIT Press, 2007.

Cahan, Susan. "Carrie Mae Weems." *Exhibit*, no. 2 (May 4, 2004): 24–24.

Campt, Tina. *Image Matters: Archive, Photography, and the African Diaspora in Europe*. Duke University Press, 2012.

Canning, Susan. "Interview: Carrie Mae Weems." *Art Papers* 17, no. 3 (June 5, 1993): 35–38.

———. "Review of Carrie Mae Weems: Projects, Museum of Modern Art, Nov. 2-Jan.2, and From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried, P.P.O.W., Jan. 11-Feb. 10." *Art Papers* 20, no. 2 (March 1996): 50.

———. "Robert Kirschbaum: Temple Gates/Carrie Mae Weems." *Art Papers* 15, no. 4 (August 7, 1991): 45–46.

Carpio, Glenda Rossana. "Critical Memory in the Fictions of Slavery." Ph.D., University of California, Berkeley, 2002. http://search.proquest.com/pqdtglobal/docview/251694890/abstract/3A265265D4E54BFDPQ/7.

Carr, C. "More Than Meets the Eye: The Quiet Revolution of Carrie Mae Weems." *The Village Voice*, March 4, 2003. http://www.villagevoice.com/content/printVersion/174225.

"Carrie Mae Weems." *Modern Painters* 24, no. 8 (October 2012): 41–41.

"Carrie Mae Weems." *Artforum International* 52, no. 2 (October 2013): 103.

"Carrie Mae Weems: Dance, Bodies, and Aging | ART21." Accessed March 14, 2016. http://www.art21.org/texts/carrie-mae-weems/interview-carrie-mae-weems-dance-bodies-and-aging.

"Carrie Mae Weems: Three Decades of Photography and Video." *Creative Quarterly*, no. 33 (January 2014): 2–2.

Cembalest, Robin. "Chatting with MacArthur Winner Carrie Mae Weems." *ARTnews*, October 1, 2013. http://www.artnews.com/2013/10/01/carrie-mae-weems-on-winning-macarthur-fellowship//.

Chambers, Eddie. "Carrie Mae Weems: Cafe Gallery Projects, London." *Art Monthly*, no. 288 (August 2005): 30–31.

"Chicago Relief 'Queen' Guilty." *New York Times*, March 19, 1977.

Chude-Sokei, Louis. *The Last "Darky": Bert Williams, Black-on-Black Minstrelsy, and the African Diaspora*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2006.

Clinton, Hillary. "The Diplomacy of Art." *Vanity Fair*, February 2013. http://www.vanityfair.com/news/politics/2013/02/hillary-clinton-art-embassies.

Cohen, Joyce. "McMullen Museum of Art, Boston College/Chestnut Hill: Original Visions: Shifting the Paradigm, Women's Art 1970-1996." *Massachusetts* 18 (July 6, 1997): 51.

Collins, Lisa Gail. *The Art of History: African American Women Artists Engage the Past*. New Brunswick, NJ, and London: Rutgers University Press, 2002.

Collins, Patricia Hill. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. New York and London: Routledge, 2000.

Conley, Kevin. "State Craft." *Town & Country*, April 2016.

Conner, Jill. "Bearing Race." *Afterimage* 40, no. 3 (December 11, 2012): 29–30.

Cooks, Bridget R. "See Me Now." *Camera Obscura*, no. 36 (September 1995): 66–83.

Coontz, Stephanie. *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap*. New York: Basic Books, 1992.

———. *The Way We Really Are: Coming to Terms with America's Changing Families*. New York: Basic Books, 2008.

Coontz, Stephanie, Maya Parson, and Gabrielle Raley. *American Families: A Multicultural Reader*. New York: Routledge, 1999.

Copeland, Huey. *Bound to Appear: Art, Slavery, and the Site of Blackness in Multicultural America*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2013.

———. "'Bye Bye Black Girl': Lorna Simpson's Figurative Retreat." *Art Journal* 64, no. 2 (Summer 2005): 62–77.

———. "CLOSE-UP Specters of History." *Artforum International* 53, no. 1 (September 2014): 342–45.

Cotter, Holland. "Art In Review: Carrie Mae Weems — 'The Hampton Project.'" *The New York Times*, March 23, 2001, sec. Arts. http://www.nytimes.com/2001/03/23/arts/art-in-review-carrie-mae-weems-the-hampton-project.html.

———. "Art in Review: Carrie Mae Weems: A Survey at Jack Shainman Gallery." *The New York Times*, February 29, 2008. http://www.nytimes.com/2008/02/29/arts/design/29gall.html.

———. “PHOTOGRAPHY VIEW; In Sharp Anecdotal Relief, a Regional Tale.” *The New York Times*, December 4, 1994, sec. Arts. http://www.nytimes.com/1994/12/04/arts/photography-view-in-sharp-anecdotal-relief-a-regional-tale.html.

———. “Testimony of a Cleareyed Witness: Carrie Mae Weems Charts the Black Experience in Photographs.” *The New York Times*, January 23, 2014. http://www.nytimes.com/2014/01/24/arts/design/carrie-mae-weems-charts-the-black-experience-in-photographs.html.

Crawford, Joe, ed. *The Black Photographers Annual* 1 (1973).

———, ed. *The Black Photographers Annual* 2 (1974).

———, ed. *The Black Photographers Annual* 3 (1976).

Crimp, Douglas. “Pictures.” *October* 8 (1979): 75–88.

Crowe, Ann Glenn. “Carrie Mae Weems.” *Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond; Exhibit* 21 (August 7, 1997): 67–67.

Curtis, Cathy. “ART : Down-Home Look Belies Power of Carrie Mae Weems’ Works : Photo-and-Text Pieces on Display at UC Irvine Fine Arts Gallery Are Billed as ‘field Reports’ of Black Life in the United States.” *Los Angeles Times*, October 21, 1991. http://articles.latimes.com/1991-10-21/entertainment/ca-66_1_uc-irvine-fine-arts-gallery.

Curtis, James C., and Sheila Grannen. “Let Us Now Appraise Famous Photographs: Walker Evans and Documentary Photography.” *Winterthur Portfolio* 15, no. 1 (1980): 1–23.

Cutler, Jody B. “Carrie Mae Weems: Three Decades of Photography and Video/Carrie Mae Weems: The Museum Series.” *Afterimage* 41, no. 6 (June 5, 2014): 34–35.

Dartnall, Colette. “Invisibility and Black Identity in the Work of Carrie Mae Weems and Lorna Simpson.” M.A. Thesis, University of Southern California, 1997.

Davis, Angela Y. *Women, Race, & Class*. New York: Vintage Books, 1983.

Davis, Jingle. “Hog Hammock.” *The Atlanta Journal*, November 10, 1996.

DeCarava, Roy, and Langston Hughes. *The Sweet Flypaper of Life*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1955.

Delmez, Kathryn E., ed. *Carrie Mae Weems: Three Decades of Photography and Video*. New Haven and London: Frist Center for the Visual Arts in association with Yale University Press, 2012.

Dent, Gina, ed. *Black Popular Culture: A Project by Michele Wallace*. Seattle: Bay Press, 1992.

Deschin, Jacob. "'Family of Man'; Panoramic Show Opens At Modern Museum." *The New York Times*, January 30, 1955, sec. Photography.

Desmond, Kathleen. "Carrie Mae Weems: The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art." *New Art Examiner* 29, no. 4 (April 3, 2002): 75–75.

Diawara, Manthia. "Black Spectatorship: Problems of Identification and Resistance." In *Black American Cinema*, edited by Manthia Diawara, 211–20. London: Routledge, 1993.

Dogu, Hikmet, and James H. Carmin. "Review of Then What?: Photographs and Folklore." *Art Documentation: Bulletin of the Art Libraries Society of North America* 10, no. 1 (Spring 1991): 46–47.

Douglas, Andrea Noelle. "Towards a Black Feminist Theory: A Look at the Work of Carrie Mae Weems and Lorna Simpson." M.A. Thesis, University of Virginia, 1996.

Douglas, Ann. *Terrible Honesty: Mongrel Manhattan in the 1920s*. New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1996.

Douglass, Frederick. *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*. New York: Penguin Books, 2014.

Dubin, Zan. "Black and Wright : The Personal and the Political Sides of Carrie Mae Weems Find Forums at UCI." *Los Angeles Times*, October 10, 1991. http://articles.latimes.com/1991-10-10/news/ol-442_1_carrie-mae-weems.

———. "Censorship in Arts: Alive and Well : Jock Reynolds, Director of the Addison Gallery, Brings an Exhibit to Newport Harbor Museum and Recounts His Involvement in the Mapplethorpe Affair." *Los Angeles Times*, March 9, 1993. http://articles.latimes.com/1993-03-09/entertainment/ca-1133_1_newport-harbor-art-museum.

Duganne, Erina. "Family Folktales: Carrie Mae Weems, Allan Sekula, and the Critique of Documentary Photography." *English Language Notes* 49, no. 2 (Fall/Winter ///Fall/Winter2011 2011): 41–52.

———. "Transcending the Fixity of Race: The Kamoinge Workshop and the Question of a 'Black Aesthetic' in Photography." In *New Thoughts on the Black Arts Movement*, edited by Lisa Gail Collins and Margo Natalie Crawford, 187–209. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2006.

Dundes, Alan. *Cracking Jokes: Studies of Sick Humor Cycles and Stereotypes*. Berkeley: Ten Speed Press, 1987.

———, ed. *Mother Wit from the Laughing Barrel: Readings in the Interpretation of Afro-American Folklore*. Jackson and London: University Press of Mississippi, 1973.

Edwards, Adrienne. "Carrie Mae Weems." *Aperture*, no. 221 (Winter 2015): 102–11.

Eklund, Douglas. *The Pictures Generation*. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2009.

Ellis, Trey. "The New Black Aesthetic." *Callaloo*, no. 38 (Winter 1989): 233–43.

English, Darby. *How to See a Work of Art in Total Darkness*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2007.

Estrin, James. "The 'Genius' of Carrie Mae Weems." Lens Blog, 1380141077. http://lens.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/09/25/the-genius-of-carrie-mae-weems/.

Failing, Patricia. "Carrie Mae Weems." *ARTnews* 112, no. 8 (September 2013): 104–104.

Fairbrother, Trevor. *Family Ties: A Contemporary Perspective*. Salem, MA: Peabody Essex Museum with Marquand Books, 2003.

Family. Ridgefield, CT: The Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art, 2002.

Fanon, Franz. *The Wretched of the Earth*. New York: Grove Press, 1963.

Farrington, Lisa E. "Conceptualism, Politics, And The Art Of African-American Women." *Source: Notes in the History of Art* 24, no. 4 (July 2005): 67–75.

———. *Creating Their Own Image: The History of African-American Women Artists*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2005.

Frazier, E. Franklin. *The Negro Family in the United States*. University of Chicago Press, 1939.

Frazier, Herb. "Scholars Differ on Gullah Origin." *The Post and Courier*. February 20, 1997.

Frazier, LaToya Ruby. "Carrie Mae Weems: Three Decades of Photography and Video." *Artforum International* 51, no. 2 (October 2012): 115.

Freud, Sigmund. *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*. New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1960.

Friis-Hanson, Dana. “From Kitchen Table and Beyond.” In *Carrie Mae Weems: The Kitchen Table Series*. Houston: Contemporary Arts Museum, 1996.

Fritch, Jane. “Welfare Queen Becomes Case Study.” *Chicago Tribune*, October 29, 1978.

Fusco, Coco. “Wreaking Havoc on the Signified.” *Frieze*, May 1995. https://frieze.com/article/wreaking-havoc-signified.

Fusco, Coco, and Brian Wallis, eds. *Only Skin Deep: Changing Visions of the American Self*. New York: International Center of Photography and Harry N. Abrams, Inc., Publishers, 2003.

Gamerman, Ellen. “A Star Three Decades in the Making.” *Wall Street Journal*, January 23, 2014. <http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424052702304603704579322743178754268.

Gangitano, Lia, and Steven Nelson, eds. *New Histories*. Boston: Institute of Contemporary Art, 1996.

Gates, Henry Louis, Jr. *Bearing Witness: Selections from African-American Autobiography in The Twentieth Century*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1991.

———. *Colored People: A Memoir*. New York: Vintage Books, 1994.

———. “Dis and Dat: Dialect and the Descent.” In *Figures in Black: Words, Signs, and the “Racial” Self*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1987.

———. *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989.

Gilman, Sander L. *Difference and Pathology: Stereotypes of Sexuality, Race, and Madness*. Cornell University Press, 1985.

Gilroy, Paul. *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993.

Glassie, Henry. *The Spirit of Folk Art*. New York: Abrams, 1989.

Golden, Thelma. *Black Male: Representations of Masculinity in Contemporary American Art*. New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1994.

Gordon, Allan. “The Power of Language: Nommo: In The Spirit of the Word at Bomani Gallery.” *Artweek*, 1991, 14.

Gubar, Susan. *Racechanges: White Skin, Black Face in American Culture*. Cambridge: Oxford University Press, 2000.

Hall, Stuart, and Mark Sealy. *Different*. London: Phaidon, 2001.

Harris, Leslie J. "Motherhood, Race, and Gender: The Rhetoric of Women's Antislavery Activism in the Liberty Bell Giftbooks." *Women's Studies in Communication* 32, no. 3 (October 1, 2009): 293–319. https://doi.org/10.1080/07491409.2009.10162392.

Harris, Michael. "Ritual Bodies—Sexual Bodies: The Role and Presentation of the Body in African-American Art." *Third Text* 4, no. 12 (1990): 81–95.

Harris, Michael D. *Colored Pictures: Race and Visual Representation*. Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 2003.

Harris, Thomas Allen. *Through a Lens Darkly: Black Photographers and the Emergence of a People*. First Run Features, 2014.

Heartney, Eleanor. "Carrie Mae Weems P.P.O.W." *ARTnews*, January 1991.

———. "Carrie Mae Weems P.P.O.W." *ARTnews* 92 (February 1993): 108.

Henderson, Robbin. *Ethnic Notions: Black Images in the White Mind*. Berkeley: Berkeley Art Center, 1982.

Henderson, Robbin Legere, Judith Wilson, Fawaz Turki, E. San Juan Jr., and Jerry Robinson. *Prisoners of Image: Ethnic and Gender Stereotypes*. New York: The Alternative Museum, 1989.

Herring, Cedric, Verna Keith, and Hayward Derrick Horton. *Skin/Deep: How Race and Complexion Matter in the "Color-Blind" Era*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004.

Hirsch, Marianne, ed. *The Familial Gaze*. Hanover, NH: Dartmouth College Press, 1999.

hooks, bell. *Art on My Mind: Visual Politics*. New York: The New Press, 1995.

———. *Black Looks: Race and Representation*. Boston: South End Press, 1992.

Hurston, Zora Neale. "Characteristics of Negro Expression." In *Negro: An Anthology*, edited by Nancy Cunard, 24–31. New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1970.

———. *Folklore, Memoirs, and Other Writings*. New York: The Library of America, 1995.

———. "High John de Conquer." *The American Mercury*, October 1943.

———. “Hoodoo in America.” *The Journal of American Folklore* 44, no. 174 (1931): 317–417.

“Influences: Betye Saar.” Accessed January 12, 2018. https://frieze.com/article/influences-betye-saar.

“Interview with Carrie Mae Weems.” *Camerawork* 21, no. 2 (Fall/Winter ///Fall/Winter94 1994): 24–25.

Isaak, Jo Anna. *Feminism and Contemporary Art: The Revolutionary Power of Women’s Laughter*. New York and London: Routledge, 1996.

Jackson, Phyllis J. “(In)Forming the Visual: (Re)Presenting Women of African Descent.” *International Review of African American Art* 14, no. 3 (January 3, 1997): 31–37.

Jacob, Mary Jane. “Carrie Mae Weems: Transatlantic Conversation, or, Testament to the Endurance.” *Cimaise* 45, no. 253 (April 1998): 88–92.

Jaeger, William. “Everson Museum of Art/Syracuse: Recent Work: Carrie Mae Weems, 1992-1998.” *Exhibit* 20, no. 3 (May 4, 1999): 53–53.

Jones, Kellie. *EyeMinded: Living and Writing Contemporary Art*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011.

———. “In Their Own Image.” *Artforum* 29 (November 1990): 133–38.

Kelley, Jeff. “The Isms Brothers.” *Artweek*, May 7, 1992, 4.

Kelsey, Robin, Katori Hall, Salamishah Tillet, Dawoud Bey, and Jennifer Blessing. “Vision & Justice: Around the Kitchen Table.” *Aperture*. Accessed July 6, 2016. http://aperture.org/blog/vision-justice-around-kitchen-table/.

Kemp, John R. “Carrie Mae Weems: Newcomb Art Gallery, Tulane University.” *Exhibit* 103, no. 6 (June 2004): 122–122.

Kirsch, Andrea, and Susan Sterling. *Carrie Mae Weems*. Washington, DC: National Museum of Women in the Arts, 1994.

Kistler, H. Ashley. “Carrie Mae Weems: Africa Series.” In *Carrie Mae Weems: Africa Series*. Richmond: Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, 1997.

Kling, Susan. *Fannie Lou Hamer: A Biography*. Chicago: Women for Racial and Economic Equality, 1979.

Knelman, Sara. “Carrie Mae Weems.” *Frieze*, no. 168 (February 1, 2015): 149–149.

Knight, Christopher. "Art Review: Social Studies on the Blackboard : Gary Simmons' Powerful 'Erasure Drawings' Softly Deliver a Stark Comment on America's Manic Hellishness." *Los Angeles Times*, October 5, 1995. http://articles.latimes.com/1995-10-05/entertainment/ca-53468_1_artist-gary-simmons.

Kohler-Hausmann, Julilly. "'The Crime of Survival': Fraud Prosecutions, Community Surveillance, and the Original 'Welfare Queen.'" *Journal of Social History* 41, no. 2 (2007): 329–54.

Kokontis, Kate Menninger. "'I Saw It in the Negotiations of the Real World Conducted in the Land of Make Believe' or, Carrie Mae Weems: Bearing Witness to the Rememory of Slavery." M.A. Thesis, University of California, Berkeley, 2007.

Levine, Lawrence W. *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1978.

Lewis, Jo Ann. "Art: Lessons In the Stories The Engaging Voice Of Carrie Mae Weems." *The Washington Post*. January 7, 1993.

Lewis, Sarah, and Adrienne Edwards. *Kitchen Table Series*. Bologna: Damiani and Matsumoto Editions, 2016.

Linker, Kate. "Went Looking for Africa: Carrie Mae Weems." *Artforum* 31 (February 1993): 79–82.

Lippard, Lucy R. *Mixed Blessings: New Art in a Multicultural America*. New York: New Press, 1990.

Long, Carolyn Morrow. "John the Conqueror: From Root-Charm to Commercial Product." *Pharmacy in History* 39, no. 2 (1997): 47–53.

Lorde, Audre. *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*. Watertown, MA: Persephone Press, 1982.

Lovelace, Carey. "Carrie Mae Weems at the International Center of Photography, Uptown." *Art in America* 89, no. 6 (June 2001): 123–24.

Malcom X. *By Any Means Necessary*. 1992 edition. New York: Pathfinder, 1970.

Massey, Douglas S., and Robert J. Sampson. "Introduction: Moynihan Redux: Legacies and Lessons." *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 621 (January 2009): 6–27.

McKenna, Kristine. "Photography: The Evolution of a Tough Cookie : Racism, Sexism and Classism Permeate Carrie Mae Weems' Photographic Palette." *Los Angeles*

Times, June 27, 1993. http://articles.latimes.com/1993-06-27/entertainment/ca-7582_1_artist-carrie-mae-weems.

Mellinger, Wayne Martin. "Postcards from the Edge of the Color Line: Images of African Americans in Popular Culture, 1893–1917." *Symbolic Interaction* 15, no. 4 (November 1, 1992): 413–33.

Mencken, H. L. "Designations for Colored Folk." *American Speech* 19, no. 3 (1944): 161–74.

Mercer, Valerie J. "Carrie Mae Weems, b. 1953." *Bulletin of the Detroit Institute of Arts* 86, no. 1–4 (May 2012): 80–81.

Miller-Keller, Andrea, Judith Wilson, and Carrie Mae Weems. *Carrie Mae Weems/MATRIX 115, April 21-July7, 1991*. Hartford, Conn.: Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, 1991.

Millstein, Gilbert. "While Sister Mary Sticks Around; THE SWEET FLYPAPER OF LIFE. Photographs by Roy DeCarava. Story by Langston Hughes. 98 Pp. New York: Simon & Schuster. $2.95." *The New York Times Book Review*, November 27, 1955.

Moore, Jack. "The Painful Path from Slavery." *The Tampa Tribune*, February 6, 1997.

Morgan, Jo-Ann. "Mammy the Huckster: Selling the Old South for the New Century." *American Art* 9, no. 1 (1995): 87–109.

Morrison, Toni, ed. *Race-ing Justice, En-Gendering Power: Essays on Anita Hill, Clarence Thomas, and the Construction of Social Reality*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1992.

Moss, Hilary. "Revisiting Carrie Mae Weems's Indelible Series — Almost Three Decades Later." *The New York Times*, April 5, 2016. http://www.nytimes.com/2016/04/05/t-magazine/art/carrie-mae-weems-kitchen-table-series-book.html.

Moynihan, Daniel Patrick. "The Negro Family: A Case for National Action." Washington, D.C.: Office of Policy Planning and Research, Department of Labor, 1965. http://www.dol.gov/oasam/programs/history/webid-meynihan.htm#.UMH4sZPjk4m.

Mulvey, Laura. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." *Screen* 16, no. 3 (Autumn 1975): 6–18.

Nelson, Steven. "Diaspora and Contemporary Art: Multiple Practices, Multiple Worldviews"." In *Companion to Contemporary Art Since 1945*, edited by Amelia Jones, 296–316. Blackwell Companions to Art History. Oxford: Blackwell, 2006.

Nolan, Timothy. “Preserving Hope: Carrie Mae Weems at Linda Cathcart Gallery.” *Artweek* 24 (August 5, 1993): 25–26.

Owens, Craig. *Beyond Recognition: Representation, Power, and Culture*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1994.

Palmer, Brian. “Home: Contemporary Urban Images by Black Photographers.” *Studio Museum in Harlem, New York* 18 (February 1991): 15–16.

Parker, Maegan, ed. *The Speeches of Fannie Lou Hamer: To Tell It Like It Is*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2011.

Passmore, Kaye. “A Conversation with Carrie Mae Weems.” *School Arts* 109, no. 8 (April 2010): 28–29.

Patterson, Vivian. “Carrie Mae Weems Serves Up Substance.” *Gastronomica: The Journal of Food and Culture* 1, no. 4 (Fall 2001): 21–24.

Patton, Sharon F. *African-American Art*. Oxford History of Art. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1998.

Pegler-Gordon, Anna. *In Sight of America: Photography and the Development of U.S. Immigration Policy*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009.

Picard, Charmaine. “A Q & A with Carrie Mae Weems.” *Modern Painters*, January 2014.

Piper, Adrian. *Colored People*. London: Book Works, 1991.

———. “The Triple Negation of Colored Women Artists.” In *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader*, edited by Amelia Jones, 239–48. New York and London: Routledge, 2003.

Pollman, Sarah. “Stereotypes.” *Art New England* 36, no. 5 (October 9, 2015): 76–76.

Powell, Richard J. *Black Art: A Cultural History*. 2nd ed. London: Thames & Hudson, 2002.

———. “Lamentations from the ’Hood.” In *Kerry James Marshall: Mementos*, 31–51. Chicago: The Renaissance Society at The University of Chicago, 1998.

———. *The Blues Aesthetic: Back Culture and Modernism*. Washington, D.C.: Washington Project for the Arts, 1989.

Princenthal, Nancy. “Carrie Mae Weems at P.P.O.W.” *Art in America* 79 (1991).

Prose, Francine. “Beautiful and Horrible.” *The New York Review of Books* LXIII, no. 3 (May 12, 2016): 50–52.

Rappolt, Mark. “Carrie Mae Weems.” *Art Review* 67, no. 1 (February 1, 2015): 128–128.

Reid, Calvin. “Carrie Mae Weems.” *Arts Magazine*, January 1991, 79.

Riggs, Marlon. *Ethnic Notions*. California Newsreel, 1987.

Rosenthal, Angela, ed. *No Laughing Matter: Visual Humor in Ideas of Race, Nationality, and Ethnicity*. Hanover, NH: Dartmouth College Press, 2016.

Rothkopf, Scott. *Glenn Ligon AMERICA*. New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 2011.

Ryan, William. *Blaming the Victim*. New York: Random House, 1971.

Safire, William. “ON LANGUAGE; People of Color.” *The New York Times*, November 20, 1988, sec. Magazine. http://www.nytimes.com/1988/11/20/magazine/on-language-people-of-color.html.

Saltz, Jerry, and Rachel Corbett. “It Was the Most Reviled Show in Museum History, and the One That Most Changed Art.” *New York*, May 18, 2016.

Scott, Andrea K. “A Place at the Table.” *The New Yorker*, January 27, 2014. http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/01/27/a-place-at-the-table.

Scott, Joan W. “Multiculturalism and the Politics of Identity.” *October* 61 (1992): 12–19. https://doi.org/10.2307/778780.

Sekula, Allan. “The Body and the Archive.” *October* 39 (Winter 1986): 3–64.

Sheets, Hilarie M. “Carrie Mae Weems, Photographer and Subject.” *The New York Times*, September 12, 2012. http://www.nytimes.com/2012/09/16/arts/design/carrie-mae-weems-photographer-and-subject.html.

Sherlock, Maureen P. “A Dangerous Age: The Mid-Life Crisis of Postmodern Feminism.” *Arts Magazine* 65 (September 1990): 70–74.

Simpson, Coreen. “Carrie Mae Weems: Visual Artist.” *Artist & Influence* 24 (December 2005): 175–81.

Sims, Martha C., and Martine Stephens. *Living Folklore: An Introduction to the Study of People and Their Traditions*. Logan: Utah State University Press, 2005.

Soutter, Lucy. “By Any Means Necessary: Document and Fiction in the Work of Carrie Mae Weems.” *Art & Design* 11 (December 11, 1996): 70–75.

Spillers, Hortense J. “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book.” *Diacritics* 17, no. 2 (Summer 1987): 65–81.

Squiers, Carol. “Domestic Bliss: The Modern Cleans House.” *Artforum International* 30, no. 2 (October 1991): 88–91.

Staples, Robert. “The Myth of Black Macho: A Response to Angry Black Feminists.” *The Black Scholar* 10, no. 6/7 (April 1979): 24–33.

“Statement from Black Faculty at Tufts.” *The Tufts Daily*, April 20, 1993.

Stretch, Bonnie Barrett. “Photography: A New Era.” *ARTnews* 91 (March 1992): 96–101.

Stuckey, Sterling. *Slave Culture: Nationalist Theory and the Foundation of Black America*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1987.

Swan, L. Alex. “A Methodological Critique of the Moynihan Report.” *The Black Scholar* 5, no. 9 (1974): 18–24.

Tarlow, Lois. “Carrie Mae Weems Interview with Lois Tarlow.” *Art New England* 12 (September 1991): 11–12.

Tate, Claudia, ed. *Black Women Writers at Work*, 100–116. New York: Continuum, 1983.

Tharps, Lori L. *Same Family, Different Colors: Confronting Colorism in America’s Diverse Families*. Beacon Press, 2016.

The Decade Show: Frameworks of Identity in the 1980s. New York: Museum of Contemporary Hispanic Art, The New Museum of Contemporary Art, The Studio Museum in Harlem, 1990.

Thompson, Barbara, ed. *Black Womanhood: Images, Icons, and Ideologies of the African Body*. Hanover, NH: Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth College, 2008.

Turner, Grady T. “Carrie Mae Weems at P.P.O.W.” *Art in America* 84, no. 6 (June 1996): 103.

Turner, Patricia A. *Ceramic Uncles & Celluoid Mammies: Black Images and Their Influence on Culture*. New York: Anchor Books, 1994.

“UC San Diego Exhibition Features Work by 7 Leading International Women Artists.” Accessed February 28, 2018. http://ucsdnews.ucsd.edu/pressrelease/uc_san_diego_exhibition_features_work_by_7_leading_women_artists.

Unruh, Allison. “Spotlight Essay: Carrie Mae Weems | Kemper Art Museum,” September 2016. http://www.kemperartmuseum.wustl.edu/node/11590.

Vance, Carol S. “The War on Culture.” *Art in America* 77, no. 9 (September 1989): 39–45.

Wallace, Maurice O., and Shawn Michelle Smith, eds. *Pictures and Progress: Early Photography and the Making of African American Identity*. Duke University Press, 2012.

Wallace, Michele. *Black Macho and The Myth of Superwoman*. Haymarket Series. New York and London: Verso, 1990.
———. *Invisibility Blues: From Pop to Theory*. New York and London: Verso, 1990.

Wallis, Brian. ““Questioning Documentary.” *Aperture*, no. 112 (1988): 60–71.

Wallis, Brian, Marianne Weems, and Philip Yenawine, eds. *Art Matters: How the Culture Wars Changed America*. New York: New York University Press, 1999.

Ward, Frazer. “Foreign and Familiar Bodies.” In *Dirt and Domesticity: Constructions of the Feminine*, 8–37. New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1992.

Weaver, A. M. “Carrie Mae Weems: History and Dreams.” *Aperture*, no. 197 (Winter 2009): 24–29.

Weaver, William Woys. “The Dark Side of Culinary Ephemera: The Portrayal of African Americans.” *Gastronomica: The Journal of Food and Culture* 6, no. 3 (August 1, 2006): 76–81.

Weems, Carrie Mae. *And 22 Million Very Tired and Very Angry People*. San Francisco: San Francisco Art Institute, 1992.

———. “Carrie Mae Weems Responds.” *ARTnews* (blog), May 26, 2015. http://www.artnews.com/2015/05/26/carrie-mae-weems-responds/.

———. “Family Pictures and Stories: A Photographic Installation.” M.A. Thesis, University of California San Diego, 1984.

———. “Home.” *Art in America* 102, no. 4 (April 2014): 34–35.

———. Lecture at the Sackler Center for Feminist Art, Brooklyn Museum, Brooklyn, NY, 2009. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WabrgaaRTj8.

———. *Then What? Photographs and Folklore*. Buffalo, NY: CEPA Gallery, 1990.

Wei, Lilly. “Carrie Mae Weems NASHVILLE - Frist Center for the Visual Arts.” *Art in America* 100, no. 11 (December 2012): 189–90.

Willis, Deborah. “Carrie Mae Weems: A Look Back on Three Decades.” *Time Lightbox* (blog), September 20, 2012. http://time.com/52802/carrie-mae-weems-a-look-back-on-three-decades/.

———, ed. *Picturing Us: African American Identity in Photography*. New York: New Press, 1994.

———. *Reflections In Black: A History Of Black Photographers, 1840 To The Present*. New York: Norton, 2000.

Willis-Thomas, Deborah. “Weems, Carrie Mae.” In *An Illustrated Bio-Bibliography of Black Photographers, 1940-1988*. New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1989.

Wilson, Judith. “Beauty Rites: Towards an Anatomy of Culture in African American Women’s Art.” *International Review of African American Art* 11, no. 3 (June 1994): 11.

———. “One Way or Another: Black Feminist Visual Theory.” In *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader*, edited by Amelia Jones, 22–26. New York and London: Routledge, 2003.

Wood, Susan M. “Seeing into the Mirror: The Reality of Fiction in the Work of Carrie Mae Weems.” M.A. Thesis, University of Missouri-Columbia, 2007.

Wright, Richard. *12 Million Black Voices*. New York: Basic Books, 2008.

Young, Kevin. *The Grey Album: On the Blackness of Blackness*. Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2012.

Zarro, Jennifer. “Carrie Mae Weems: Three Decades of Photography and Video.” *Woman’s Art Journal* 35, no. 1 (Spring/Summer ///Spring/Summer2014 2014): 50–51.