“If the only critical writing about the work of black photographers looks at the work in a manner that sees it only through the lens of a colonizing gaze, then the universal, metaphysical dimension of that work will never be discussed...There has to be a challenge to critics to come back to this early work and reconsider ways of seeing and writing about it. In all spheres of cultural production, work by black artists rarely receives sophisticated critical attention from the outset...All too often, black artists must reach a certain prominence before the critical writing about their work stops being shallow and superficial.”

-bell hooks, “Talking Art with Carrie Mae Weems” (1995)¹

When I first came to the assignment of writing about Carrie Mae Weems, it was unclear to me how I would begin to unpack her vast body of work. I was equally lost in the question of how I would add anything to what dozens of critics had already written (quite favorably) on her work. The work, upon approach, seemed so polemic. I was startled when I read a quote from Weems, somewhere (perhaps serendipitously, the whereabouts I cannot remember), where she expressed how suffering inspired her. In part, I felt as though it was an incredibly regressive stance for Weems to take, and in part, I felt I had little experience to contribute to this standard, although my background in taking photographs of falling down drunks in nightclubs proved the same—that indeed, suffering inspires me as well.

In reading a conversation between Benjamin Buchloh, Miwon Kwan, Rosiland Krauss, Hal Foster and Silvia Kobowski on the 1993 Whitney Biennial in October, I began to address this frustration. In the conversation, Krauss posed the question of whether the notion that certain people are closer to the real—i.e. those who have undergone more suffering, is a racist one, in juxtaposition with art history being posited as a less “significant” kind of history. And although the other participants in the conversation immediately tore the flesh from Krauss’s argument, much of the overall

conversation lamented over what circumstances warrant a work of art to be validated on the information it disseminates alone. I wondered if Weems’s work, not specifically engaged in this conversation would, in the panel’s eyes, irritate the “schism between so-called form and so-called content.” But as I continued to engage the early works of Carrie Mae Weems, I found relate-ability far beyond her seemingly polemic demeanor.

Throughout her career, Carrie Mae Weems has fluctuated between two poles; she has moved between the instructive and the personal. When Weems tires of a more direct way of working, she switches to the intimate to elaborate on questions regarding race, sexuality and dislocation which she poses within her more explicit work. I find that the bodies of work in which Weems approaches the personal, are where she is most productive in problematizing histories in a humanistic light. Thus, I will focus this paper on Weems’s earliest and most personal work, *Family Pictures and Stories* (1978-84), *Untitled (Kitchen Table Series)* (1990) and look to, peripherally, *Sea Islands* (1991-92) and *Africa* (1993). I will frame my reading of these works by the writings of bell hooks and Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham. Weems’s drive to speak to the politics of identity, suffering, subverting a colonizing gaze, black feminism and diaspora is evident within more polemic bodies of work, such as *Ain’t Jokin’* (1987-88), which Weems finished after she completed the idiosyncratic *Family Pictures*. Such is also true of *From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried* (1995-96), which Weems developed after finishing *Untitled, Sea Islands* and *Africa*. Thus, I will also look to these more explicit bodies of work to direct me in my approach to the more politicized elements within Weems’s more subtle works. It is my hope that through an in-depth analysis of Weems’s more personal work of her earlier oeuvre, I will do justice to hooks’ call for a more sophisticated, metaphysical approach to Weems’s works.

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3 Ibid, 6.
Photographed between 1978 and 1982, *Family Pictures and Stories* explores the function of documentary work by repurposing the documentary practice from that of one looking at an other into that of one looking at one’s immediate surroundings. Weems inserts in the place of the other the subject matter of her own family. While it was important for her to align her work with the black on black gaze, foregrounding the subjectivity of individuals like Roy DeCarava over that of Garry Winnograd or Bruce Davidson,4 Weems uses the notion of blacks looking at blacks as a model for a more universal ambition, that of an individual looking within one’s own community as an enriching alternative to the act of stigmatizing others.

Weems offers a practice of subjective looking as a means to transcend the colonizing gaze.5 She captions the photographs with personal narrative. These captions ignore formal rules regarding brevity and objectivity. The narrative pays homage to what is left out of normalized family albums,6 and blurs the line between joyous occasions, familial identities and tragic events.

In “Welcome Home,” [Figure 1] the text under the photograph 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.’”

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5 Ibid, 12.

6 Ibid, 11.
By bringing attention to the fact that she herself hadn’t seen her folks for a while, Weems acknowledges her own distance from her family. Perhaps her own experience of studying in California distanced her from her family’s experience. This simple apprehension of going back to a family that might not share any of the attributes one once shared with them dispels the myth of a single “black experience,” as validated by an overarching, homogenous set of ideals pertaining to race, or, as Evelyn Higginbotham puts it, race as a metalanguage.7

In “Dad with Suzie-Qs [Figure 2],” Weems presents a diptych of two formal, posed photographs, each containing images of man and a woman embracing. The text underneath reads,

“Daddy--much to the dismay of my mother--definitely has a way with the ladies. They swarm around him like bees to honey, they just love him. Man has so many women he calls them all Suzie-Q so he doesn't have to remember any one name.”

By calling attention to her father, she embraces the intimacy of gaze within her community. But this information she reveals about “her father” is akin with many stereotypes regarding black men: that they are womanizers. Weems calls into our attention the notion which bell hooks frames in her essay, “Reconstructing Black Masculinity:” “Black masculinity, as fantasized in the racist white imagination, is the quintessential embodiment of man as ‘outsider’ and ‘rebel.’ They were the ultimate “traveling men” drifting from place to place, town to town, job to job.”8 This particular stereotype is loaded with layers of black male identity, and contains the idea that this romanticized rebel identity is both idolized and vilified by blacks and whites alike.9 Weems, however, invites this stereotype into an intimate setting, with a tone of endearment, not casting it out. By producing photographs which represent the stereotype within a banal family portrait, Weems addresses these complex ideas without succumbing to another stereotype that grants the “drifter” identity such thrill10—that the black man is threatening. Furthermore, upon closer inspection, the men and women in each of the photographs are two completely different couples. By inserting two different women in the laps of two different men, Weems confounds the viewer’s expectations of seeing two different women with the same man. Because the formal structure of the photographs are so similar, the viewer must look twice to see this difference. This sort of trick leaves the viewer having to reconcile their own mis-step in their perception of the work, and confront their reading of the photograph as an indicator that they might in fact believe that all black men and all black women look and act alike.


9 Ibid.

10 hooks, bell, “Eating the Other, in Black Looks: race and representation, (Boston: South End Press, 1992), 26: “the lure [of the other] is a combination of pleasure and danger. In the cultural marketplace, the other is coded as having the capacity to be more alive.”
In *Family Pictures and Stories*, the confrontation with the stereotype occurs not through the direct appropriation of the information, such as in the text-image pairings of *Ain’t Jokin’* [Figure 3]. Instead, Weems requires the viewer to dislodge these racist notions and recognize them as part of one’s own cultural knowledge bank. This time, its personal. The viewer has become acquainted with the family Weems represents as her own, yet this not-so-innocent bystander still finds oneself questioning whether the Weems family fits into the stereotypes he or she has just recognized. To top it off, by claiming ownership of this stereotype through its anecdotal format, Weems takes its decommission into her own hands.

Oral tradition is an important mechanism that Weems utilizes in her work. In an interview with Brian Wallis in 1988, Weems proclaimed, “For hundreds of years, people have used the oral tradition...breathing life into days gone, times remembered and stories told.”

11 In her essay on Carrie Mae Weems for the *Untitled* (Kitchen Table Series) exhibition catalog, Dana Fris-Hansen elaborates on this idea, and notes that all of Weems’s texts are “sprinkled with African-American slang, sayings, and song lyrics.”

12 In Weems’s work, stereotype functions as a form of oral tradition in itself.

In *Family Pictures and Stories*, Weems supplements the photographs and texts with an audio recording for exhibitions such as the one that took place at the Multi-Cultural Gallery in San Diego in 1984. While the inclusion of Weems’s voice offers an engaging way for the viewer to enter the story, I am more interested in how a variety of people’s voices sound while reading the text accompanying the photographs. The transmission of the story through the reader’s own voice opens up possibilities for interpretation of the text based on the viewer’s own lexical style. ” M.M. Bakhtin notes,

11 Fris-Hansen, Dana, *From Carrie’s Kitchen Table and Beyond*, Exhibition Catalogue (Houston: Contemporary Arts Museum, 1996).

12 Ibid.

13 See 5, 12.
“The word in language is half someone else’s. It becomes ‘one’s own’ only when the speaker populates it with his [or her] own intention, his [or her] own accent, when he [or she] appropriates the word, adapting it to his [or her] own semantic and expressive intention.”

Thus, who is reading the text that Weems supplies supplements the text’s meaning. Weems invites the viewer to partake in oral tradition, and actively facilitates a mixing of lexical styles characteristic of any linguistic diaspora. The question of the survival and/or loss of a language through diaspora is a complex phenomenon that attempts to decipher the intricacies of how much survives, where, to what capacity, through what means and for which individuals or groups over others. Weems gifts a language that describes quotidian black experience to the public sphere, thus commissioning such complexities insufficiently addressed by theorists such as E. Franklin Frazier or Melville Herskovits, who vastly simplified the quantification of the losses or preservations of Africanisms in American culture.

It’s conceivable that the usage of such personal themes and subject matter, such as her own family, revealed to Weems themes in her own work that she would find accessible through more explicit means. Following her completion of *Family Pictures and Stories*, Weems went on to study Folklore at the University of California, Berkeley, from 1984-87. She then went on to produce *Ain’t Jokin’* (1987-88), *American Icons* (1988-89), *Colored People* (1989-1990), *And 22 Million Very Tired and Very Angry People* (1989-1990). It was during this time that she addressed overt political themes in the most explicit, formal ways. *American Icons* and *Ain’t Jokin’* continued to make device of the fallacies of documentary, but lacked the subjectivity so effective in her first body of work. In 1990, it seems that Weems was looking for an answer to all of the direct questions she had posed with the first wave of

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work she produced in the mid- to late-1980s. *Untitled (Kitchen Table Series)* proved to be an in-depth exploration of her queries.

In *Untitled*, Weems offers a more specific approach to identity, further disavowing the categorization of her work as black, and honoring her desire to address feminist concerns within her work. *Untitled* is, in part, a response to Laura Mulvey’s 1989 collection of essays, *Visual and Other Pleasures*.\(^{16}\) While Mulvey elaborates on the male gaze as a universal experience in womanhood, Weems acknowledges in her 1995 conversation with bell hooks, that the *Untitled* was a response to the “gaps” in Mulvey’s text in considering black female subjects.\(^{17}\) Evelyn Higginbotham echoes this cry in 1992, when she argues that race obscures gender, and gender obscures race, and more room must be made for the specific experiences of women of various races.\(^{18}\) In *Untitled*, Weems provides the viewer with a third-person, yet subjective narrative of a man and women’s relationship, told more or less with preference to the female protagonist’s point of view. The images, all framed with the same foregrounding of the kitchen table, showcase figures within the tableau sitting interacting opposite the viewer. The images are punctuated by a textual narrative, which functions separately, and in conjunction with alternating triptychs and single photographs. The written text, while an intimate glance into a set of lives, functions ubiquitously and addresses issues such as fidelity, monogamy, monetary concerns, and the desire, or lack of desire, for children. Weems poses as the primary female protagonist for the photographs, further personalizing the work. *Untitled* is both at once, a demarcation of the black female experience, missing from scholarly feminist discourse and popular culture alike, and a personal undertaking on her own experiences as a woman.

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\(^{16}\) See 1, 84.

\(^{17}\) Ibid.

\(^{18}\) See 8.
Just prior to fabricating the photographs which serve as the main images within *Untitled*, Weems fashioned a prototype for her male protagonist. In “Jim, If You Choose... [Figure 4],” at first part of the series, *THEN WHAT? Photographs and Folklore* (1990), Weems presents a portrait of a black man, and appropriates a line from the 1960s and 70s television show, *Mission Impossible*, to overlay the image. The original line in the show, played from the tape recorder was, “Your mission, Jim, if you choose to accept it...” Weems reframes the line into asking the protagonist to “land on his own two feet.” The text accompanying the photograph reads, “Jim, if you choose to accept, the mission is to land on your own two feet.” bell hooks discusses this photograph in “Talking Art with Carrie Mae Weems:”

“If you think of white patriarchy as the framework within which black men are asked to construct an identity, and that there has been a capitulation that black maleness has made to that system, then your subversive image says, “You have a choice, black man.”

Although *Untitled* provides an alternate image with which black women may identify, the series elaborates on how the black woman’s discourse in identity is inextricably linked to issues black men have faced and continue to confront throughout the civil rights and post-civil rights movement. In “Reconstructing Black Masculinity,” bell hooks discusses the relevance of the black male experience to the black female experience. Throughout her essay, hooks probes the experience of the black female in the context of black men subjecting themselves to phallocentric ideologies enforced by a colonizing gaze. hooks claims these inherited male behavioral patterns disregard alternative lifestyles, such as the single female, the single male, or the gay experience, and in turn hinder the ability for black women to function as autonomous beings. She poses the question:

“Many black women who had endured white supremacist patriarchal domination during slavery did not want to be dominated by black men after manumission...On one hand they did not want to be dominated, but on the other hand, they wanted black men to be protectors and providers.”

19 Ibid, 84.

20 See 9. 89-103.
its definition of freedom as having equal opportunity with whites, sanction looking at white gender roles as a norm black people should imitate?"

Weems unpacks these issues with the events within Untitled’s narrative [Figure 5]. The couple fights because he is “much too domineering,” and because he isn’t working (read: fitting into the canonical patriarchy) and she is. At one point, the narrative switches to the viewpoint of the couple’s daughter, who feels like “this mommy/daddy stuff was a remake of jack and jill,” eluding to the patterns of emulating the white experience that hooks is describing. In many of the images, Weems presents the intricacies of dependence between a man and a woman, fighting, and reconciling. In “Untitled” (Eating Lobster) [Figure 6], the male protagonist sucks on his lobster as he would the breast of his mother, or his girlfriend, while the female protagonist sits, lobster untouched, smoking, soothing the man in lieu of feeding herself. In the background, the viewer’s eye lands on an encaged bird. Weems positions the female as a prime player within the scheme of struggles black men face post-civil rights movement. Women are both enabler, victim and catalyst of stasis and of change.

One of Weems’s more potent references to white gender dynamics shaping the way black men and women relate to one another is her use of space, the ubiquitous kitchen. Although a staple in many nuclear family dynamics, the nuclear family itself is a function of the white experience, and certainly not related to the historically African experience, which, through the study of Gullah culture of the Sea Islands, reveals strong kinship between multiple families, notably through a collective ownership of land. Furthermore, in African communities, the father held a much greater role in the lives of children, until slave ships began to break these bonds through the capture of black males and sale of children tethered to their mothers. Weems imagery, with a single overhead light, cycles through of a sparse cast of

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21 Patterson, Vivan, “Carrie Mae Weems Serves Up Substance,” Gastronomica (Fall 2001), 21.

characters and reeks of loneliness so characteristic of the traditional American housewife’s experience. Towards the end of the series, the kitchen gets filled with children and friends, yet the female protagonist’s saga begins and ends alone.

Like familial structure and language, food has undergone its own specific diaspora. Foods that once originated in a primary cultural format have, upon arrival in the U.S., appropriated and given way to the alterations of foods that originated in other locations. To ignore the function food plays in a discussion of *Untitled* would be to ignore an entire discussion in which Weems’s work is entrenched: diaspora, transnationalism and dislocation of experience. For example, in “Untitled” (Man Smoking) [Figure 7], Weems directs the light in the frame to a bowl of peanuts on the table. The peanut crop possesses a transnational history. It was first transported to Africa with Portugese sailors. The peanut was then used to feed Africans during the middle passage, and were then grown by enslaved Africans on plantations.23 Weems also brings up the peanut in a *Sea Islands* Series triptych [Figure 8], the middle photograph of a storefront is formulated in the aesthetic of Farm Security Administration photography of the Great Depression. The signage depicted in the photograph displays an image of a peanut. Next to the photograph of the storefront is a text piece with the words, “NPINDA,” “NGUBA,” “GOBERS,” and “PEANUTS,” chronicling the different names for peanut based on linguistic diaspora—“npinda” is a word from the Niger-Congo linguistic family, “nguba” derives from Bantu languages, while “goobers” and “peanuts” are American versions of these words.24 Weems draws attention to the many words for one entity, and the many points of origin of description. In both usages of the peanut, Weems positions the symbol as a means to reference diaspora and probe the fallacy of one point of origin. In conversation


with bell hooks, Weems acknowledges that the “promised land isn’t there.” Instead, Weems views identity as a palimpsest.

This postmodern digestion of a fragmented identity is informed by multiple sources, and is echoed in Weems’s consistent integration of cultural references from different periods of time into the same frame. Such is seen through the Malcolm-X poster hung on the wall in the same frame as the peanuts in “Man Smoking,” or as seen in the later, more polemic, From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried. Atop of Louis Agassiz’s altered (stained red) daggreotype of a scarred slave’s body, emblazoned in frame’s glass is the phrase, “Black and Tanned/Your Whipped Wind/Of Change Howled Low/Blowing Itself-Ha-Smack/Into The Middle of Ellington’s Orchestra/Billie Heard It Too &/Cried Strange Fruit Tears.”

This impulse to fragment, re-assimilate and flatten time stems from the same concerns that Higginbotham addresses when she attempts to untangle the mass of homogenized understandings of race. Higginbotham cites Roland Barthes in her discussion about race as a myth:

“As a fluid set of overlapping discourses, race is perceived as arbitrary and illusionary, on the one hand, while natural and fixed on the other. To argue that race is myth and that is an ideological rather than biological fact does not deny that ideology has real effects on people’s lives.”

How does an eclectic community, defined by just a few single terms that decipher only the most superficial of characteristics reconcile such a vast contradiction? How does one reconcile that these defining characteristics are, on one hand, of completely arbitrary root, a social construction in their inception, and on the other hand, indistinguishable from the experience which preceded and which has ensued as a result of such a sweeping generalization. It seems that the impulse might be, on the part of

25 See 1, 88.
26 See 1, 88.
27 See 8,
an individual or a community, to attempt to trace back to one’s roots as far as possible\textsuperscript{28}, in a desire to understand the logic behind such audacious constructions, and in a longing to honor and reclaim a heritage that has been brutally framed by an other. Perhaps this impulse to return functions socially as a direct answer to the notion that race has been socially constructed, as an abrupt act to restrict the construction from penetrating any further.

Despite Weems’s disavowal of the notion of one fixed sense of home (and of the nuclear family), she continues to make example of herself by searching for points of origin. So, in the wake of Julie Dash’s \textit{Daughters of the Dust}, via an interest in refocusing the black experience towards the south and eventually towards Africa\textsuperscript{29}, in the height of 1990s black urbanism and exotification, in the midst of Michael Jordan’s heyday, nearly fifteen years after \textit{Family Pictures and Stories} took Weems south to rekindle connections with her family, Weems journeyed to make the \textit{Sea Islands} and \textit{Africa} series. Yet, according to Weems, upon her visit to Africa, she “felt methodical and emotionally distant...A Hausa community...decided that the village shrine was off-limits to [Weems] because she was a ‘white woman’ and whites had come before and not kept their promises.”\textsuperscript{30}

In conclusion, Weems problematizes visually what hooks and Higginbotham elaborate on in terms of the social construction of race, black femininity and masculinity, and dislocation of origin. Although she does so explicitly in \textit{Ain’t Jokin’}, and \textit{From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried}, she addresses the complexity of these issues from a personalized, individualized perspective in \textit{Family Pictures and Stories} and \textit{Untitled} (Kitchen Table Series). These personal bodies of work enabled Weems to probe into the notion of what identity entails in the first place, resulting in both \textit{Sea Islands} and \textit{Africa}. In Weems’s work,

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\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{28} See 10, p. 25. Is it possible that the longing for the “primitive” other is not only a phenomenon within the colonizer, but also within the “colonized?”
  \item \textsuperscript{29} See 1, 74.
\end{itemize}
the personal functions in a manner that enables the individual story to subvert homogenized notions of
the experience of these issues. By inserting subtle symbolism and mechanisms for the viewer to derive
meaning on their own, Weems places responsibility on the viewer to demystify these complex concepts
for oneself, ultimately empowering that individual.

On one side, black artists are called to represent an underrepresented African American
experience, which has been dually framed by a colonizing gaze. Yet, there is also a need to relate these
issues in a more universal context, for black artists to contribute to a dialogue beyond blackness. It
seems that most progressive modes of thought embrace that one should not disavow a history woven
through social construction, nor should one attach to it. Weems expresses frustration with being solely
regarded as a black artist discussing the black experience, yet she refuses to abandon this point of
reference either. In fact, it is the space between the two that allows for such complexity within her
bodies of work.

Glenn Ligon said it so eloquently, while referencing the work of David Hammons:

“It's hard to leave your body behind, especially when your body is always being thrown up in your face. But being
heavy is a motherfucker. The question is: How to remove weight, to move toward lightness, as Hammond has?
How to do this while still acknowledging the particular history of a body that has been used, as Stuart Hall
suggests, “as if it was, and often it was, the only cultural capital we had.” These questions now occupy several
young artists who walk the threshold between a dematerialized and historicized body.”

In my own work, I often shy away from projects that seem too polemic or direct, too historically
rooted. But it seems these projects are necessary in order to frame the greater oeuvre, both for the artist
and the work’s audience. My work often becomes too decontextualized. If Carrie Mae Weems had not
hashed out her ideas in both direct and indirect ways, her propensity for growth would have been
significantly weakened.

31 See 1. p. 76
FIGURES
Figure 1: “Welcome Home,” Silver print, 24” x 36”, 1978-84

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.”
Figure 2: “Dad with Suzie-Q’s”, Diptych, 2 silver prints, 13” x 8 1/2” each.

Daddy—much to the dismay of my mother—definitely has a way with the ladies. They swarm around him like bees to honey, they just love him. Man has so many women he calls them all Suzie-Q so he doesn’t have to remember any one name.
Figure 3: “Black Woman With Chicken,” from *Ain’t Jokin’,* 1987-88, Silver print, 20” x 16″
Figure 4: “Jim, If You Choose…”, Silver print, 14 1/2” x 14 1/2”, 1990.
She felt monogamy had a place but invested it with little value. It was a system based on private property, an order defying human nature. Personally she wasn’t in the mood for exploring new rocky terrain. But nonetheless assured him she was secure enough in herself and their love to allow him space to taste the exotic fruits produced in such abundance by mother nature.

He was grateful for such generosity. He certainly knew the breadth of his own nature, so felt human nature was often in need of social control. For now he chose self-sacrifice for the long term benefits of her love and their relationship. Testing the strength of the relationship in this way was a dangerous game; taking a chance now might be more than either of them bargained for.
Figure 6: “Untitled” (Eating Lobster), Silver Print, 27 1/2” x 27 1/2”, 1990.
Figure 7: “Untitled” (Man Smoking), Silver print, 27 1/2" x 27 1/2", 1990.
Figure 8: From *Sea Islands*, 1991-1992: