

CARRIE MAE WEEMS

edited by Sarah Elizabeth Lewis with Christine Garnier

essays and interviews by Sarah Elizabeth Lewis, Huey Copeland, bell hooks,
Coco Fusco, Carrie Mae Weems, Thelma Golden, Deborah Willis, Robin Kelsey,
Katori Hall, Salamishah Tillet, Dawoud Bey, Jennifer Blessing, Thomas J. Lax,
Kimberly Drew, Erina Duganne, Yxta Maya Murray, Kimberly Juanita Brown,
Gwendolyn DuBois Shaw, José Rivera, and Jeremy McCarter

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From Here We Saw What Happened: Carrie Mae Weems and the Practice of Art History

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Huey Copeland got it right when he asked, “Have we all been sleeping on Carrie Mae Weems?” When my colleagues at *OCTOBER* invited me to edit this volume, Copeland’s question came to mind. There was no need to deliberate. The answer was an immediate yes. His query came on the occasion of Weems’s 2014 traveling retrospective, which was also the first solo show dedicated to an African American artist at the Guggenheim Museum. Given the timing, Copeland admitted that his “question might sound counterintuitive, considering the esteem with which the artist has been held since her emergence in the 1980s—if not altogether off the mark, given the successes she has enjoyed in the past year.”¹ Similarly, one could imagine that it would be relatively straightforward to offer a compendium of some of the most salient publications on Weems’s celebrated body of work. Yet the process of editing this volume excavated a publication pattern and sequence that only underscored the need to consider Copeland’s query as a live question to be answered, and not a rhetorical strategy alone.

Consider first what the reader of this volume will notice: the publications centered on Weems create a significant temporal break and an elliptical arc. This volume includes two essays representing publications from the mid-1990s by bell hooks and Coco Fusco, followed by two publications featuring Weems’s voice from the 2000s, bookended by landmark essays by scholars and curators including Copeland, Deborah Willis, Robin Kelsey, Salamishah Tillet, Jennifer Blessing, Thomas J. Lax, Erina Duganne, Yxta Maya Murray, Kimberly Juanita Brown, and

Gwendolyn DuBois Shaw, all representing scholarship published after 2011. Weems's work has been so prominent in exhibitions that such a temporal break might seem to be an editorial error. Yet during this period between 1996 through the mid- to late 2000s, articles and essays that mentioned Weems mainly included her in the context of larger discussions of Black artists, often Black women artists, or focused on her exclusively in the context of brief exhibition catalog essays.² In fact, when I mentioned that I would be editing this issue, Weems's first response was to ask if there were enough published articles on her work over the decades to support the endeavor. It was not mere humility. She knew. She also knew that the chronology in the scholarship made a precise critical argument of its own.

The elliptical emergences of the landmark, probing scholarship on Weems typify an emergent pattern for many artists of color, but specifically for Black artists: there are often stark gaps in the publication record even as the pace and rate of their inclusion in and selection for group and solo exhibitions increase. The result are oeuvres that may be celebrated, but are not fully documented or theorized, creating an asymmetry between acclaim and the development of a discourse surrounding the artist's work. This history exacerbates the structural inequities faced by artists of color, and by Black artists in particular. Weems reflected on these gaps in her conversation with Thelma Golden and me for this volume stating, "This is not something that just happens with me as a woman. It has happened consistently with African American artistic practice and I think it's one of the downfalls of the field to not really take it on." This volume takes it on.

The elliptical break in the scholarship on Weems also offers a unique methodology through which to trace three key shifts in the discipline of art history at large, all of which altered the reception of her work over decades of production. Briefly stated, the first is a development in the history of reception regarding African diasporic art history. As Krista Thompson has argued, two main scholarly interventions, the publication of Robert Farris Thompson's *Flash of the Spirit* (1983) and Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic* (1993), centralized the discipline of art history at the time as a site for understanding the developing ideas of diaspora, and productively expanded and critiqued what qualified as an object of art historical study in the discipline.³ During this period, art historians, curators, and cultural theorists including Suzanne Blier, Okwui Enwezor,

and Stuart Hall focused on framing the diaspora as a “process rather than a permutation of Africa,” identified the syncretic nature of African cultural forms themselves, and challenged the cultural hegemony in the field of contemporary art.⁴ A second important shift in this time period was cemented as scholars including Richard Powell and Kobena Mercer demonstrated and insisted on the imbrication of modernism with African American and African diasporic artistic practice through foundational texts such as *Black Art and Culture in the 20th Century* (1997) and *Rhapsodies in Black* (1997) by Powell and David Bailey, and Mercer’s series of books, *Annotating Art’s Histories*.⁵ A third methodological shift during this time was occasioned by scholars including Martin Berger, Maurice Berger, Hal Foster, Édouard Glissant, Nicholas Mirzoeff, W. J. T. Mitchell, Toni Morrison, Shawn Michelle Smith, Michele Wallace, and Deborah Willis who focused on the polemics, process, and construction of vision, absence, and opacity in the history of racial formation and social power.⁶

If there is any “benefit” to this belated reception of Weems’s work as these equally important shifts took place, it is that her focus and stage became not the marketplace, but the drama of history. Her non-market-oriented approach positioned her to fully occupy the role, as Kathryn Delmez has put it, of being “history’s ghost.”⁷ What emerged was a practice defined by an aesthetics of reckoning, works designed to force a confrontation with the unspeakable, allied to those who had been forgotten, unnamed, unheralded, and marshaled to examine the subjective construction of beauty and the biased formation of the “history of power.”⁸

So while this volume embraces the mission of OCTOBER Files to offer a compendium of some of the most salient writing on the artist’s body of work to date, it is best read with a consideration of what shaped and structured the patterns surrounding the critical reception of Weems’s work. It is with knowledge of these three methodological shifts—in the reception of African diasporic artistic practices as an object of study and as requisite for understanding the history of modernism, and expanded discourse on the history of visibility—that one can best understand the inevitable periodization of the scholarship on Weems in this volume. One is able to see the prescient and significant innovation by, for example, bell hooks in her 1990s scholarship on Weems addressing the political importance of Weems’s anticolonialist aesthetic through

a "diasporic landscape of longing" in series such as *Sea Island Series*, *Gorée Island*, and *Went Looking for Africa*.⁹ One, too, can better understand why the publication of the *Kitchen Table Series* came over twenty-five years after its initial creation, or why this volume treats Weems's interviews as particularly vital archival documents. Over time, the cauterization of the scholarship on her work early on turned her into one of the best analysts of her oeuvre.

It is possible to take Copeland's query even further and ask: Can one grasp the developments of intertwined fields of modernism, American contemporary, and African diasporic art without understanding the interventions of and scholarly patterns surrounding the work of Carrie Mae Weems? This volume is a salute to the work of a prodigious artist whose work has irrevocably impacted the discipline of art history and the humanities at large. It is a tribute as well, to the scholars, artists, and curators who knew this would be the case all along. It is a celebration of what together Weems and her interlocutors have achieved—a critical inquiry into her aesthetics that have occasioned a fundamental shift in envisioning the history of power so searing that her oeuvre can seem, as one of my students at Harvard put it, as if one has glimpsed "an oracle."

Notes

1. Huey Copeland, "CLOSE-UP Specters of History," *Artforum International* 53, no. 1 (September 2014): 342–345.

2. So that other scholars might benefit from a fuller list, see the following publications in English: Kathleen D. Adrian, "The Decentralization of Subject in African American Feminist Photography: Constructing Identity Based on Representation and Race in the Work of Lorna Simpson, Carrie Mae Weems and Clarissa Sligh," *disClosure: A Journal of Social Theory* 7 (1998): 11–39; Caroline A. Brown, *The Black Female Body in American Literature and Art: Performing Identity* (New York: Routledge, 2012); Lisa E. Farrington, "Conceptualism, Politics, and the Art of African-American Women," *Source: Notes in the History of Art* 24, no. 4 (Summer 2005): 67–75; Farrington, "Reinventing Herself: The Black Female Nude," *Woman's Art Journal* 24, no. 2 (Autumn–Winter 2003): 15–23; Amy Mullin, "Art, Understanding, and Political Change," *Hypatia* 15, no. 3 (Summer 2000): 113–139; Vivian Patterson, "Carrie Mae Weems Serves Up Substance," *Gastronomica* 1, no. 4 (Fall 2001): 21–24; Cherise Smith, "Fragmented Documents: Works by Lorna Simpson, Carrie Mae Weems and Willie Robert Middlebrook at the Art Institution of Chicago," *Art Institute of Chicago Museum Studies* 24, no. 2 (1999): 244–259, 271–272; Salamishah Tillet, "In the Shadow of the Castle: (Trans)Nationalism, African American Tourism, and Gorée Island," *Research in African Literatures* 40, no. 4 (Winter 2009): 122–141; Mary Drach McInnes, *Telling Histories: Installations by Ellen Rothenberg*

and Carrie Mae Weems (Seattle: University of Washington, 1999); Vivian Patterson, ed., *Carrie Mae Weems: The Hampton Project* (New York: Aperture, 2000); Eddie Chambers, "Carrie Mae Weems: Café Gallery Projects, London," *Art Monthly* 288 (July/August 2005): 30–31; Brian Wallis, "Black Bodies, White Science: Louis Agassiz's Slave Daguerreotypes," *American Art* 9, no. 2 (Summer 1995): 38–61; Coreen Simpson, *Interview of Carrie Mae Weems by Coreen Simpson* (New York: Hatch Billups Collection, 2005); Denise Ramzy and Katherine Fogg, "Interview: Carrie Mae Weems," in *Carrie Mae Weems: The Hampton Project* (New York: Aperture, 2000), 78–83; Adrienne Edwards, "Carrie Mae Weems," *Aperture* (December 2015): 102–111; Edwards, "Scenes of the Flesh: Thinking-Feeling Carrie Mae Weems's *Kitchen Table Series* Twenty-Five Years On," *Carrie Mae Weems: Kitchen Table Series* (New York: Damiani/Matsumoto, 2016), 9–15.

3. Krista Thompson, "A Sidelong Glance: The Practice of African Diaspora Art History in the United States," *Art Journal* 70, no. 3 (2011): 6–31. This incisive paper came out of a panel that Thompson co-chaired with Jacqueline Francis, "African Diaspora Art History: State of the Field," at the College Art Association's annual conference in 2010. See Robert Farris Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy* (New York: Random House, 1983); and Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993). The influence of scholarship by Henry Louis Gates Jr. on the methodologies for African diasporic analysis was key here. See Gates, *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).

4. Thompson, "A Sidelong Glance," 18. The exhaustive list of texts in this time period cannot be printed in full; however, key selections include Stuart Hall, "What Is This 'Black' in Black Popular Culture?," in *Black Popular Culture*, ed. Gina Dent (Seattle: Bay Press, 1992), 21–33; Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," in *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, ed. Jonathan Rutherford (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1990), 222–237; Okwui Enwezor, "The Postcolonial Constellation: Contemporary Art in a State of Permanent Transition," in *Antinomies of Art and Culture: Modernity, Postmodernity, Contemporaneity*, ed. Terry Smith, Okwui Enwezor, and Nancy Condee (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 207–234; and Suzanne Preston Blier, "Vodun: West African Roots of Vodou," in *Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou*, ed. Donald J. Cosentino (Los Angeles: UCLA Folger Museum of Cultural History, 1995), 61–87. As Thompson notes, James A. Porter offered a precursor to this work in his "The Trans-Cultural Affinities of African Art," in *Africa from the View of American Negro Scholars*, ed. John A. Davis (Paris: Presence Africaine, 1958); Geoff Quilley and Kay Dian Kriz, eds., *An Economy of Colour: Visual Culture and the Atlantic World, 1660–1830* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2003); Steven Nelson, "Diaspora: Multiple Practices, Multiple Worldviews," in *A Companion to Contemporary Art since 1945*, ed. Amelia Jones (Maiden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 296–316; and Nelson, *From Cameroon to Paris: Mousgoum Architecture In and Out of Africa* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).

5. Richard J. Powell, *Black Art and Culture in the 20th Century* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1997); and Richard J. Powell and David Bailey, *Rhapsodies in Black: Art of the Harlem Renaissance*, exh. cat. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1997). See also the following anthologies edited by Kobena Mercer: *Cosmopolitan Modernisms* (Cambridge, MA: Institute of International Visual Arts and MIT Press, 2005); *Discrepant Abstraction* (Cambridge, MA: Institute of International Visual Arts and MIT Press, 2006); *Pop Art and Vernacular Cultures* (Cambridge, MA: Institute of International Visual Arts and

MIT Press, 2007); and *Exiles, Diasporas and Strangers* (Cambridge, MA: Institute of International Visual Arts and MIT Press, 2008). For more, see John Davis, "The End of the American Century: Current Scholarship on the Art of the United States," *The Art Bulletin* 85, no. 3 (2003): 544–580, 570; and Michael D. Harris and Moyosore B. Okediji, *Transatlantic Dialogue: Contemporary Art In and Out of Africa*, exh. cat. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1999).

6. Thompson, "A Sidelong Glance," 8, 19. See Martin A. Berger, *Sight Unseen: Whiteness and American Visual Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005); Maurice Berger, "Are Art Museums Racist?," *Art in America* 78, no. 9 (1990): 68; Maurice Berger, *White Lies: Race and the Myths of Whiteness* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1999); Hal Foster, *Recodings: Art, Spectacle, Cultural Politics* (Port Townsend, WA: Bay Press, 1985); Édouard Glissant, "For Opacity," in *Over Here: International Perspectives on Art and Culture*, ed. Gerardo Mosquera and Jean Fisher (New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art, 2004); Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness in the Literary Imagination* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992); Shawn Michelle Smith, *American Archives: Gender, Race, and Class in Visual Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999); Nicholas Mirzoeff, *Diaspora and Visual Culture: Representing Africans and Jews* (New York: Routledge, 2000); W. J. T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994); Michele Wallace, "Modernism, Postmodernism and the Problem of the Visual in Afro-American Culture," in *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures*, ed. Russell Ferguson, Martha Gever, Trinh T. Minh-ha, and Cornel West (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990), 39–50; Deborah Willis, *Picturing Us: African American Identity in Photography* (New York: New Press, 1994); Willis, *Reflections in Black: A History of Black Photographers, 1840 to the Present* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2000); Deborah Willis and Carla Williams, *The Black Female Body: A Photographic History* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002); Willis, *Constructing History: A Requiem to Mark the Moment* (Savannah, GA: Savannah College of Art and Design, 2008).

7. Kathryn E. Delmez, "Introduction," in *Carrie Mae Weems: Three Decades of Photography and Video*, ed. Kathryn E. Delmez (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press and the Frist Art Museum, 2012), 9. Claire Raymond has argued that the belated institutional reception of Weems's work in a consistent fashion allowed her to focus on a riskier strategy that the market does not necessarily reward, at least in the short term. See Raymond, "The Crucible of Witnessing: Projects of Identity in Carrie Mae Weems's *From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried*," *Meridians: Feminism, Race, Transnationalism* 13, no. 1 (January 2015): 26–52. See also Robin Kelsey, "Tribute to Carrie Mae Weems," W. E. B. Du Bois Medal Ceremony, Hutchins Center Honors, Harvard University, September 30, 2015.

8. Weems cited in Dawoud Bey, "Carrie Mae Weems," *BOMB*, no. 108 (Summer 2009).

9. bell hooks, "Diasporic Landscapes of Longing," in *Carrie Mae Weems*, exh. cat. (Philadelphia: The Fabric Workshop, 1994), 29–39.