

JOURNEYS TO THE PAST. EXPLORING THE VISUAL ARCHIVE OF SLAVERY IN CARRIE MAE WEEMS'S *FROM HERE I SAW WHAT HAPPENED AND I CRIED*

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This article examines Carrie Mae Weems's *From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried* (1995-1996), an installation she created when she was asked by the Getty Museum to respond to their exhibition *Hidden Witness: African Americans in Early Photography*. *From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried* is a series of appropriated photographs from the nineteenth and twentieth century that she enlarged, cropped, colored and inscribed with short texts that weave them into a narrative. Among the repurposed images are the infamous daguerreotypes of enslaved Black Americans taken by J. T. Zealy for Swiss-American scientist Louis Agassiz in 1850 to support his theory of polygenesis. By the early 1990s they had become emblematic of the violence of representation and though Weems had signed an agreement with Harvard University, the institution that claimed to own them, that she would not use them in her work, she decided she had the moral right to reclaim them. As a conceptual artist engaged in debunking the assumptions of authenticity, objectivity and truthfulness on which documentary photography relied, Weems aimed less to redress the humanity of the violated Black sitters, then to reveal through her work on their images the epistemic system produced by slavery and colonialism. Read in sequence, the words engraved on the glass placed over the prints create a compelling, poetic monologue that dialogues and clashes with the images to revisit the history of the stereotyping of Black Americans and highlight the imbrication of visibility and racism. Basing on Linda Hutcheon's concept of *photo-graphy*, that is to say postmodern photographic works that are in themselves «*both photo and graphic*» (124) – the hyphen signaling the equal weight of both media – the article analyzes the series as a photo-text that aims to trouble the racial visual archive produced by slavery in the US, querying its authority and its reliance on the referentiality and indexicality of photography.

Keywords: Carrie Mae Weems, visibility, archive, race, slavery

It's a kind of literary archeology: on the basis of some information and a little bit of guess work you journey to a site to see what remains were left behind and to reconstruct the world that these remains imply
(Morrison 1995, 92).

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Introduction

In 1993 conceptual artist Carrie Mae Weems, already well-known for her photographic work centering African American experience to reflect on issues of power, gender, race, history, and memory, was asked by the Getty Museum, LA, to respond to their upcoming exhibition *Hidden Witness: African Americans in Early Photography*. The exhibition was mainly based on the private collection of Jackie Napoleon Wilson, a descendant of slaves. Wilson questioned the absence of African Americans in early photography archives, believing that it depended more on a lack of interest on the part of museums than a paucity of documents, and had managed to assemble an impressive collection of images of black life in nineteenth-century America. As Jennifer Doyle underlines, Los Angeles was reckoning with the aftermath of Rodney King's trial and the riots of 1992, and the Getty Museum's project «unfolded within a public conversation regarding the ethics of bearing witness, of testimony and perspective» (115). The aim of the exhibition was openly reparative: displaying a counter-archive that showed African Americans engaged in normal, everyday activities, so as to challenge the abundance of racial stereotypes in US-American visual culture. It was also based on an unquestioning belief in photography's referentiality and ability to capture and document history.

Weems's initial response was, «Why me?» (quoted in Doyle 114), perhaps because this belief was precisely what she had engaged in debunking through her work. Weems had started out in her photographic career as a documentarian, influenced by Roy DeCarava's «subversive politics of representation» of black subjects (hooks 67), but had come to question the assumptions of authenticity, objectivity and truthfulness on which documentary photography relied. As she affirmed in a 2009 interview,

for my photographs to be credible, I needed to make a direct intervention, extend the form by playing with it, manipulating it, creating representations that appeared to be documents but were in fact staged. In the same breath I began incorporating text, using multiple images, diptychs and triptychs, and constructing narratives (Bey s.p.).

Like many other African American women artists of the eighties and nineties, as well as writers and playwrights, she was probing the documentary evidence of the American racial and gender archive in order to denaturalize it and show its afterlife, as well as ask crucial questions about truth and power. As Lisa Gail Collins underlines, these black women artists aimed to «dismantle the visually assaultive potential of photography while simultaneously laying claim to its social power» (Collins 24). They resemanticized documentary photographs by ma-

nipulating, coloring, cropping, and reframing them, by adding texts and audio recordings so as to expose their fabricated truth and highlight the complexities and contradictions of the lives they claimed to represent. Weems's installation responded to *Hidden Witness* precisely in these terms.

Weems's Response to Wilson's Counter-Archive

On January 10, 1995, the Getty Museum issued a press release to announce the opening of Weems' installation, entitled "Carrie Mae Weems Reacts to *Hidden Witness*". It included Weems's declaration that her purpose was «to critique images of black people and *really to critique photography*» (Getty 1-2, emphasis added). Weems re-photographed, cropped and printed archival images, mostly nineteenth-century portraits, but also more recent photographs, such as P. H. Polk's "The Boss" (1932), Garry Winogrand's "Central Park Zoo" (1967), and Robert Mapplethorpe's "Man in Polyester Suit" (1980). She enlarged them all to life size, except for the two profile photographs of an African woman bookending the series and two portraits of families, which are larger than the rest.

She colored blue and framed with a thin black border the image of the African woman, whose profile opens and, printed in reverse, closes the installation, serving as a sort of frame to the narrative produced by the other photographs, which begins with images of slaves and ends with photographs of the Civil Rights Era. The framing photograph, the famous "Nobosodrou, Femme Mangbetou", taken in 1925 by George Specht and Léon Poirier during the Citroën automobile crossing of Africa known as *La Croisière Noire* (1924-1925), gives a diasporic slant to the installation, evoking a geography and temporality of black representation that predates the Middle Passage and extends beyond the United States.

Weems cropped, colored red, and placed the other appropriated photographs in circular mats that suggest the lens of a camera. They were then mounted under a glass on which she sandblasted short texts. Read in sequence, they make a compelling, poetic monologue that dialogues and clashes with the images to revisit the history of «creating Black Americans» (2006), as Nell Irvin Painter aptly phrased it in her book title.

The first four red-colored images were appropriated by Weems from the Zealy daguerreotypes, which by the early 1990s had become emblematic of the violence of representation and the epitome of photography as «a punitive field – the scene of punishment – in which the subjugation of blacks continues through the reproduction of denigrating racial stereotypes» (Fleetwood 13). As Weems underlined, they «crystalize and compress [...] the history of African Americans in the history of photography» (quoted in Barbash 415). The text engraved on

them («You Became a / Scientific Profile// A Negroid Type// An Anthropological/ Debate// & a Photographic Subject» [Lydenberg and Anderson 111-112]) summarizes and exemplifies the racial discourse that created Black Americans, which in the rest of the installation is further articulated, exposed in its contradictions, complicated by the black response to it, and commented upon by a repeated ironic «ha». The series later became known as *From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried*, from the words superimposed on the two blue-colored prints, and turned into one of Weems's most celebrated and discussed works.

Troubling the Archive

In the early 1990s Weems visited Harvard's Peabody Museum to see the Zealy daguerreotypes, fifteen rare images of enslaved African Americans, partially or fully naked, which Alexander Agassiz, son of Swiss-American naturalist Louis Agassiz, had donated to Harvard University in 1910. In 1935 the daguerreotypes were moved to the Peabody Museum, where they lay forgotten until 1976, when they were discovered in the museum's attic.

The images had been taken for Agassiz, who had selected the specimens that seemed to best document his theory of the separate origins of humankind, in a South Carolina plantation in 1850, by photographer J.T. Zealy. Zealy sent the daguerreotypes to Agassiz with labels identifying the name, job, ethnic group and owner of the sitter, precious information that in 2019 allowed Tamara Lanier to claim two of them, Renty and Delia, as her ancestors and start a long legal battle against Harvard's illegal possession of their images. The images were apparently shown in public only once by Agassiz (Barbash 408), possibly because polygenesis would soon be discredited by Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*. When in 1977 the discovery was announced, the story was picked up by the press, turning the daguerreotypes into the most discussed images from the nineteenth century and the evidence of the ethically problematic and colonial roots of anthropology (410). Because of their controversial nature, the museum restricted publication, allowing only Brian Wallis to include all of them in a 1995 article, until 2009, when their scholarly circulation was permitted (412).

The museum's policy required Weems to sign an agreement that she would not use the images, but she decided she had a right to reclaim them: «I knew that I couldn't leave them where they were. [...] I should reconstruct and build a new context for them so that they could take on a new life» (quoted in Barbash 407). When Harvard University discovered Weems's breach of the agreement, they threatened to sue her. She replied that she believed she had a moral case, if not a legal one, and was willing to have a public conversation about the ow-

nership of those stolen images and the ongoing profiting off the labor of black bodies on the part of a prestigious academic institution. Harvard eventually relented. In the end, they even bought the four series items reproducing the Zealy daguerreotypes, which are now often on display on the first floor of Harvard Art Museum (Lewis).

Carrie Mae Weems was the first artist to shift a predominantly ethical discussion to a more political and legal confrontation. Through her appropriation she started a process that has recently come to a landmark outcome: at the end of May 2025 Harvard renounced their property rights and announced that a settlement with Tamara Lanier was reached. The daguerreotypes will be now hosted by the International African American Museum in Charleston, South Carolina.

Weems had already used the appropriated images of Delia, Drana and Jack in three triptychs in the *Sea Islands Series* (1991-92), which explored the rich African heritage of the Gullah communities. They obviously became crucial for the critique of photography at the heart of *From Here I Saw*. Because of the need to legitimize slavery through racism and teach white people to see *race* (see Smith and Sliwinski, on the optical production of the modern concept of race), the American visual archive is dominated by images representing blackness as a site of subjection and utter difference, like the Zealy daguerreotypes. Blacks started to fight against them as soon as they arrived in American plantations and, like many other oppressed groups, they have mostly relied on «progressive realism» to redress distorted representations (Shohat and Stam 178-179). Weems, however, was not interested in merely proving that Delia, Drana, Jack and Renty were human, nor that they were not the passive victims of the white racial gaze, which, as Saidiya Hartman underlines in her critique of Molly Rogers' book *Delia's Tears* (2010), is merely «a confirmation of the given – yes, the enslaved are human» (522). She aimed to create a work that «would question their historical paths and at the same time propel them forward to the future» (quoted in Barbash 407).

When blackness becomes the all-important sign, Weems has lamented, audiences tend to assume that the images they are looking at are about victimization, instead of explorations of power and gender dynamics and of photography as an artistic medium (hooks 78-79). As Nicole Fleetwood underlines in *Troubling Vision: Performance, Visuality, and Blackness*, black cultural studies' focus on the visual «as a punitive field» (13), has led to neglecting or misunderstanding black visual artists whose work, like Weems's, is geared more towards reflecting on how visuality structures our interpretation of the world, than towards producing “authentic” representations of blackness. Artists that, in other words, address the racial archive so as to, paraphrasing W.J.T. Mitchell, “show *seeing* race” and how this has affected identity processes for both Blacks and whites

in the US. Their works are sometimes reduced to what they have to offer in terms of denunciation of the politics of representation. This has happened to Weems's work, and especially to the series *From Here I Saw*, which is often seen as providing a reparative experience to the viewer, based on what Aida Levy-Hussen has identified as the «hermeneutic of therapeutic reading» that has become predominant in Black Studies in the last decades. Understood as an effort to redress a traumatic past, the series is sometimes condemned for trafficking in and replicating the original abuse (on this, see Smith 1999 and 2019; and Raynaud 30-39).

Weems's installation is fully part of the «archival turn» that was in full bloom in the 1990s (Foster) and of the «re-orientation [...] toward the psychic, moral, and documentary problems posed by the African American slave past» (Levy-Hussen 2) that has been ongoing in African American literature, film, music, and the arts since the 1980s. Yet Weems's aim in the series is not merely reparative, but also and more importantly deconstructive; her appropriations of existing images reveal that the visual field is «itself a racial formation, an episteme, hegemonic and forceful» (Butler 17), a system of seeing and knowing produced by slavery and colonialism. As it happens in the more productive efforts at revisiting the enslaved past, Weems's aim is to trouble the archive, specifically querying its reliance on the referentiality and indexicality of photography and its authority, by means of the interplay between the reworked images and the texts, an aspect often overlooked in readings that underscore her re-humanization of black sitters.

From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried as photo-text

Memory [...] is not an effort to find out the way it really was – that is research. The point is to dwell on the way it appeared and why it appeared in that particular way.
(Morrison 1984, 385)

Weems's questioning of documentary photography relies on a main strategy: while the documentary aesthetic favors the disappearance of the photographer from the photograph, she visibilizes her intervention in the photographic act by appearing in the image in person and/or through her words, and constructing narratives, thereby alerting the viewer to the workings of visibility. She creates photo-texts, that is, signs produced by the interaction of the image and the text and the colliding and/or merging of their specific hermeneutics and conventions. Her photo-texts belong to the genre that Linda Hutcheon has termed *photo-graphy*, that is to say postmodern photographic works that are in themselves «both photo and graphic» (124) – the hyphen signaling the equal weight of both

media –, works where the «relation of the text to the image is never one of pure redundancy, emphasis, or repetition» and «the text [...] never guarantees any one single, already apparent meaning» (125). In photo-graphic works, Hutcheon elucidates, the role of the textual is neither that of anchorage (fixing the meaning) nor of relay (elucidating the meaning) to the visual, as Roland Barthes noted about advertising and photojournalism. On the contrary the textual actually tends to unfix the meaning of the visual, puzzling the viewer and asking for their active participation (124-125). In postmodern photo-graphy texts are superimposed on the images or, if separated, linked to them through irony or parody, so that the «very borders between the pictorial and the linguistic are simultaneously being asserted and denied – in short, radically de-naturalized» (132).

Hutcheon's concept of photo-graphy can be applied to the relation between the visual and the textual in *From Here I Saw*, where the engraved texts are often puzzling, both in their cryptic style, with the use of deictics and interjections, and their intertextual references, which, just like the origins of the repurposed photographs, are never clarified. In other words, they tend to unfix the installation's message, asking the viewer/reader to actively participate in the meaning-making process, and never guaranteeing its closure. The Nobosodrou item is an example of this tactic. The Mangbetu queen is placed at the beginning and end of the series, clearly in the position of a witness, analogous to the muse/guide persona Weems's own body has often represented in other works. It is easy to read her as the African ancestress, symbolizing a full, free and proud humanity, witnessing and mourning the dehumanization of Africans following the Middle Passage, as several critics have indeed done. Yet, as Weems certainly knew, that very image, disseminating the elongated head, elaborate headdress, and naked breasts of Nobosodrou on stamps, postcards and in magazines, was part of a colonialist and racist discourse that objectified and sexualized African women, analogous to the one exemplified by the daguerreotypes of Delia, Drana, Renty and Jack that we see next (see, for more on the image of Nobosodrou, Clement s.p.).

At the same time, however, the elegant, haughty Nobosodrou has become more than the exoticized/eroticized Black Venus that was meant and taken to be in 1920s France. Already in 1927 Aaron Douglas had appropriated it for the May cover of *Opportunity* as an emblem of Black beauty and in the following decades it often inspired Black artists as an icon of cultural resistance. Does Weems's appropriation aim to free Nobosodrou from a white primitivist gaze and celebrate her as the embodiment of a resistant blackness? As Catherine Gander notes in "Black and White Landscapes," the pronoun with which she is associated «combines with that of Weems and of the viewer to extend and complicate the colonial gaze, especially within the historically white setting – the "here" – of the art gallery» (531).

Who the “I” who saw and cried is, in other words, is not clear: if Nobosodrou as witness and guide is a stand-in for Weems, does the “I” refer to the photographer herself? Is Nobosodrou mirroring the viewers’ act of witnessing within the installation, and in a way being a stand-in for them? Does the «here» refer to Africa or to the space where the work is displayed? And who is she addressing in her monologue? The use of the past tense seems to place “what happened” at a safe distance from the viewer, but the fact that they see their faces reflected by the glass surface over those of the photographed subjects in the other items creates instead an unsettling proximity.

The recurring pronoun “you” in the monologue is similarly ambivalent, since in looking at the image and reading the texts, eerily engraved on their own faces, the viewers simultaneously occupy the position of the sitter and, because of the circular mat recalling a camera lens, that of the photographer. The circular mat, though, also resembles a peephole, evoking the «pornotroping» of the black body (Spillers), and so the viewer’s active role in the imbricated workings of visuality and racism. The tone of Weems’s poem is equally complex, as it signifies on the archival images combining witticisms, irony, sarcasm, and lament, while shifting from the white supremacist discourse to African Americans’ complicity with it, as well as their negotiations and reversals of its meaning. The poem deflates its scientific authority with the literality of «You Became a / Scientific Profile» and «& a Photographic Subject» (Lydenberg and Anderson 111-112) engraved over the profile image of Delia and the frontal portrait of Drana; it ironically comments its practical outcomes, as in the «You Became/ Mammie,/ Mama,/ Mother &/ Then, Yes,/ Confidant – Ha» (Lydenberg and Anderson 113) engraved over the famous portrait of a black woman in a white bandanna and poor clothes boldly staring into the camera by the African American photographer Prentice Hall Polk, entitled “The Boss”, the “ha” pointing to the fungibility of black female bodies exploited both physically and emotionally; it summons the complicity of literature («You Became Uncle Tom/ John & Clemens’ Jim» [Lydenberg and Anderson 116]) in the stereotyping of blackness, but also the power of black cultural expressions to create beauty from pain in the words sandblasted over the image of the fugitive slave Gordon known as «The Scarred Back»; it sarcastically denounces the blatant paradoxes of a discourse constructing black women as both mammies and jezebels, as in the text written over the pornographic image of a naked black woman, followed by that of a nursemaid with her charge («You Became/ Playmate/ To the/ Patriarch// And Their Daughter» [Lydenberg and Anderson 120]).

By letting the seams, sutures, and inconsistencies emerge from the racial archive’s apparently smooth logic, as well as by following its afterlife, and calling the audience out on their complicity in the present, Weems’s art, as Huey

Copeland has brilliantly summed up, «all too often flattened into a caricature of its reparative content – always cuts deep into the space of representation, asking us to look hard *into* the image, even when it is patently two-dimensional» (14).

Conclusion

As a photo-text *From Here* is an unstable work for several reasons: in literature it is credited as consisting of thirty-three to thirty-four prints; when exhibited it is often displayed only partially, depending on the number of images owned by a museum and the kind and scope of the exhibition – collective, solo, or retrospective – it is included in. The way images are assembled on museums' walls can also vary, though they are usually lined up as book pages to read, some of them in clusters of two and four that suggest an even closer thematic proximity. In addition, while the words engraved on the images have stayed the same, some of the images have changed in time. However mutable and fragmented in its physical installations, nevertheless, the series, as Weems conceived it, offers a powerful critique of the imbrication of power, race, and gender in the Western visual episteme.

As evident already in her earlier work, Weems questions the authority and autonomy of the singular photographic image through an «engaged critical-participant approach» (Collins 30) and installations that ask to be *read* as pages of a book. By inserting her own body into the image as «a witness and a guide» who stands in for both the photographer and the audience (Bey s.p.), by adding texts that visibilize authorship, summon the viewer and foreground the code's hidden rules, by weaving photographs into a tale, Weems undermines the myth of photographic truth and explodes the experience of the lone visitor of an exhibition into a performance, replacing the monologic discourse of documentary photography with the complex polyphonic and multilayered narrative of photo-texts.

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