VISUAL ACTIVISM IN THE PHOTOGRAPHY OF CARRIE MAE WEEMS

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BY
Kate Moranski

APPROVED:

Michael Plante
Director of Thesis

Leslie Geddes
Second Reader

Adam McKeown
Third Reader
This thesis offers a visual analysis of two exhibitions by photographer Carrie Mae Weems, *The Kitchen Table Series* and *From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried*. I apply the term visual activism to her work and argue that these two exhibitions offer an activist perspective that challenges the assumptions of her audience and of society in general about the roles of Black people, particularly Black women, in American culture. In the introduction, I present the concept of visual activism and discuss a definition established by South African visual activist and artist Zanele Muholi. The introduction also examines artistic influences on Carrie Mae Weems, particularly Black photographer Roy DeCarava. Chapter One focuses on *The Kitchen Table Series*. In 20 images and 14 text panels, Weems stages a scene where she is both actor and director. Her use of self-portraiture as a form of visual activism is an intimate use of the individual to question assumptions about race and gender. In Chapter Two, I examine *From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried*, a collection of 34 appropriated images, matted and covered by glass onto which text is etched. Weems reinterprets photographs that were exploitative and voyeuristic in their original context and participates in visual activism by prompting viewers of many cultures and backgrounds to re-examine American history and photographic representations of Black people. The conclusion then works to connect portraiture and visual activism and reiterates how Weems uses text and image to confront issues of race, gender, and the historical representation of Black people.
PREFACE

In writing this thesis, I acknowledge my position of privilege as a White woman. It is the lens through which I view and analyze Weems’s portfolio. My Whiteness gives me power and privilege to address issues of race and visual activism. My identities provide me with the ability to write this study, but I also acknowledge my distance from the experiences of Weems and from the ideologies and social identities in her work.
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Introduction: Visual Activism and Carrie Mae Weems’s Artistic Influences

Visual activism is a term first given prominence at a two-day symposium on visual culture and activist practice in March 2014 at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA) sponsored by the International Association for Visual Culture in collaboration with SFMOMA.¹ The political influence of art and its impact on the viewing public hardly constitutes a new topic in visual culture,² but the term visual activism is a relatively new one.³ The aim of this thesis is to explore the concept of visual activism through the photography of artist Carrie Mae Weems (1953-) in two of her series, The Kitchen Table Series (1990) and From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried (1995-96). Weems uses portraiture as a way to examine concepts of race, gender, and representation in these two series, and, in using portraiture in particular, offers an activist perspective that challenges the assumptions of her audience. Through these images, she provides a consciousness raising, bringing to the viewers intentional and constructed images of Black people, particularly Black women, throughout history.

Key to an exploration of visual activism in the photography of Carrie Mae Weems is a full understanding of the term visual activism. The March 2014 symposium at


3 Since 2014, other exhibitions have borrowed the term and related terms like “artist as activist.” In 2016, for example, Saint Mary’s College of Art in Morago, CA hosted an art exhibition entitled “Social Change: It Happens to One, It Happens to All”; see Amy Pleasant, “Artists as Activists: Pursuing Social Justice,” Huffington Post, September 9, 2016, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/artists-as-activists-purs_b_11783614?guccounter=1&guce_referrer=aHR0cHM6Ly93d3cuZ29vZ2VuYWJsZS5vcC8yMjAxMjA0Ny9pZC5wZ2VvdGggZ2VuY2Y%3D&guce_referrer_sig=AQAAAMoZx4UZflj2LryzM4wvSbp4eatTbwkeOTQqNhZaQ3ROxWQPJHbxqaoHbMcQwH4GZWKSS81QbdCFHulsLWxqmpVTibHcC_aBawCxaNcYJQfTt2vt7Zm6gSF7gFD7ZzCLmu1BHHzJbqxaOoesL53J4yQ02q5N-AkGeQSc4fE.
SFMOMA, called *Visual Activism*, explored a set of questions about how our “broader visual culture is shaped by activist practices that occupy public spaces” and how we can better realize the impact of art that takes place under conditions of political or social injustice, war, and social uprising. The symposium also explored “strategies that could be deployed to transform our engagement with the built environment and broader ecologies,” and how “embedded social hegemonies, such as racism, figure in the larger efforts to engage with activism visually.”  

*Visual Activism* was followed up by a one-day symposium, *Bearing Witness*, that investigated changes in the field of modern photography that focus on political and social messaging. Together, these two symposia explored the power of visual culture, particularly photography, to represent, (re)define, interrogate, and deconstruct political and social events and social identities. The organizers of *Visual Activism*, Julia Bryan-Wilson, Jennifer A. González, and Dominic Willsdon, credit photographer Zanele Muholi, one of their 2014 keynote speakers, with creating the term visual activism “as a flexible, spacious rubric to describe [their] own practice, which documents and makes visible Black lesbian communities in South Africa.”  

Muholi explains the term directly: “In my instance, visual activism has a lot to do with two things: connecting the visual and my activism. Which means that every image that I take has a lot to do with politics. In my work, I am pushing a political

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6 Muholi is gender nonbinary and prefers they, their, them pronouns, which I will use in discussing this artist.

Muholi is a member of the queer South African community who works in the medium of photography documenting portraits of the LGBTQ community. Muholi was born in 1972 in Durban, South Africa, growing up during apartheid. As a child they witnessed the daily indignities that Black South Africans faced from the Afrikans government. Muholi has worked throughout their career trying to provide safe and empowering spaces for women and queer people, founding the Forum for the Empowerment of Women and Inkanyiso, a queer collective focusing on activism and social media. Through photography, specifically self portraiture, Muholi works to respond to the oppression of identities of race and gender. They believe, “Self portraiture was a way in which I wanted to respond to racism and gender, using materials that confine a person or force one to look at oneself in a different way.” Weems’s two collections, *The Kitchen Table Series* and *From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried* predate Muholi’s theorization of the term visual activism, but Weems also focuses on portraiture, and, in *The Kitchen Table Series*, on self-portraiture and domesticity, in an effort to break down the barrier between reality and representation. Both artists reconceive Black identity “in ways that are largely personal but inevitably political.”

Muholi, in fact, would prefer to be called a visual activist rather than an artist, but that is not the case with Weems, who first and foremost self-describes as an artist. For Weems, the art comes first, and the political messaging is integral to the works. Without the

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10 Berger, “Zanele Muholi.”
political message, the art would not have the same effect on the viewer. As Bryan-Wilson, González, and Willsdon suggest, “No art is neutral but the practices examined in these pieces largely address themselves to economic, social, and political circumstances with special—if not fully transparent—intensity.” While Weems’s work is not specifically a focus of the Visual Activism symposium, in looking at her photographic inspirations, such as Roy DeCarava and the Black Photographers Annual, and the themes regarding race and gender through portraiture referenced in her works, I argue that her work represents visual activism.

One of the aspects of Weems’s art that makes her a visual activist is the performative nature of her work. In The Kitchen Table Series, Weems assembles the image that is shown to the viewer. She uses lighting, props, and characters to tell a story. She also uses the socially constructed definitions of womanhood, especially in the space of the kitchen, and the racial metaphor of being a Black woman who literally and figuratively has a seat at the table. These images can individually stand on their own, thus making the viewer consider the gendered and racialized world they have entered in each separate photograph. The woman in the images, whom Weems herself plays, is an Everywoman, a figure meant to draw attention to larger questions about race and gender through the stereotypes implicit in her story. In From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried, the performance is generated by her recontextualization of dehumanizing, racist anthropological images. The artist appropriates historical photos that span from the mid-1800s to the 1950s and 60s and reinterprets their meaning using matting in combination with sand-blasted glass and text to create an entirely new object that prompts fruitful

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conversations on identity and preconceived notions of race, social roles, and the history of photographs, with a specific focus on portraiture featuring African Americans. Weems’s art gives back a humanity that was taken away in the original photographs. The performative aspect of the exhibition lies in the rhythm of text and image and the sequencing of the photographs, an integrative act that makes the whole more than the sum of its parts. She draws new attention to old stereotypes by transforming the photographs, colorizing them in red, the color of blood, a somber reference to the lives lost to slavery and White supremacy. She also uses a circular frame that serves as a lens into the lives of the people who were portrayed once as possessions and are now reborn and valued as individuals. Angela Davis Johnson argues that Weems “creates space for both the marginalized and hegemonic community to confront and undo the damage of societal oppression via individual and institutional practices” and “shatters preconceived limitation by allowing viewers to shed the negative weight of stereotypes and embody their true selves.”

The performative aspect of Weems’s photography—her creation of a narrative through the sequencing of text and image—becomes political by exposing stereotypes and societally imposed oppressions and engaging her viewers to reconsider the darker narratives and histories she presents. Chapter One will discuss the constructed nature of her Kitchen Table Series that makes her both director and actor. Chapter Two will analyze performativity in the process of creating art in From Here I Saw What Happens and I Cried.

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A second feature of Weems’s visual activism is her use of black and white photography, like many of Muholi’s works. Even when Weems chooses the daguerreotypes and archival photographs in *From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried*, the underlying original image is black and white. Like other visual activists—Zanele Muholi, Selaelo Mannya, and Valerie Thomas, and other artists explored in the *Visual Activism* symposium—Weems is deploying “the historiographical as a kind of visual code.” In both *Kitchen Table* and *From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried*, I argue that Weems uses black and white images to invoke and interrogate the past—antebellum America where Black people were sold, whipped, and stripped of names and culture, the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 60s that sought to reclaim humanity and dignity for Black Americans, and second-wave feminism that often forgot about Black women as creators. Black and white images become metaphors for issues of race, past and present. She explores how Black bodies have been photographed over time and points out how Black bodies are often presented in a familiar, racist narrative that makes them objects rather than subjects. By being both in front of and behind the camera lens, Weems fills a gap and shows viewers what has been missing from the history of photography. By making a Black woman Everywoman in *The Kitchen Table Series*, she makes the viewer cognizant of an oppressive history and expands on the narrative by visualizing a Black woman in roles from which she has been excluded. The props, including the mirror, the cage, and the Malcolm X photo, provide historical context to explain why Black women have not been front and center in those roles in the past.

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A third characteristic of Weems’s work that fits into the rubric of visual activism is her pairing of visual image with text. Participants in the *Visual Activism* symposium note that political art often makes use of “a serial image juxtaposed with text.”\(^\text{14}\) Weems employs this tactic in both series. In *Kitchen Table*, she uses text to investigate the narrative of the people in the images, while also creating the narrative. The texts reveal, in an almost voyeuristic manner, the daily dramas and intimacies of the characters in the photographs. They further emphasize personalities (“She was a woman socially involved, loved to run her mouth, to talk things through. He was a man, socially involved, who thought actions speak louder than words.”) and provide a screenplay for the images. The texts also reveal differences between male and female perspectives and ask how much a woman is willing to give up of herself to fulfill the socially appropriate role of wife and mother. In *From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried*, the colorized images are covered in glass into which phrases have been etched that expose the original oppressive intention of the original photographs and provide social and political commentary on the processes of dehumanization that occurred in producing the original images. The texts politicize the images more than if the images stood alone. Visual activism provides a platform from which to explore the social and political commentary within Weems’s work and offers a framework for discussing art.

**Black Photographers, the New Negro Movement, Black Power, and Carrie Weems**

To understand how the term visual activism applies to the work of Carrie Mae Weems, it is first important to understand her artistic influences and how their work

inspired her to create series like *Kitchen Table* and *From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried*. Early in her artistic career in the 1970s, Weems was influenced by Marxism, a political philosophy that served as a touchstone for multitudes of artists throughout the twentieth century, including many artists working within the New Negro Movement, like Roy DeCarava and artists who contributed to the Black Photographers Annual.\(^{15}\) The New Negro Movement celebrated images of Black individuals and brought in a larger consciousness, an actualization of self, beauty, and art, as exemplified by Langston Hughes, W.E.B DuBois, Alain Locke, as well as DeCarava, which expanded into new arenas like the *Black Photographers Annual*. The *Black Photographers Annual* was prominent during the Black Power Movement of the 1970s and 80s. The *Annual* used photography as a medium that allowed for self-representation and documentation. When society would not recognize civil rights, the Black Arts movement, and Black individuals themselves, artists could through photography.\(^{16}\) The *Black Photographers Annual*, DeCarava, and Weems all have worked to promote the Black image within society, creating a kind of visibility within the arts world that did not exist before. Their focus around a positive Black image allowed for new opportunities for Black creatives and for the notions of the racist and oppressive world to be challenged by art.

Inspired by DeCarava, Walker Evans, and Henri Cartier-Bresson, as well as other politically-minded Black photographers like those featured in the *Black Photographers Annual*, Weems uses photographic portraiture to highlight an “awareness of Blacks and


bring to their consciousness ‘a greater knowledge of our heritage.’”¹⁷ DeCarava and Weems are both associated with documentary photography and the erasure of stereotyping through portraiture, as well as with the Black liberation politics and the Black Power movement of the 1960s and 70s. The Black Power movement sought to address what Black activists and artists saw as the failings of the Civil Rights movement. Instead, they sought to address systemic racism in the form of continued oppression, poverty, police brutality, and the double binds of racism and sexism Black women faced. Antiracism led them to radical, and anti-capitalist, ways of thinking.¹⁸ These radical approaches focused on cultural heritage and identity, and it is this focus that Weems uses in both the domestic and gendered drama of The Kitchen Table Series and the reframing of sociological racism in From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried. In a 2008 interview with Susan Sollins, Weems credited Evans and DeCarava in particular with showing her how to “approach” the world, defining “something that was culturally definitive and . . . moving through aesthetic territory—emotional, cultural, and visionary territory.”¹⁹ Weems sought such role models among prominent documentary photographers, especially Black photographers, making her work in part an exploration of Black aesthetic heritage.

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Cultural historian Maurice Berger argues in his book *For All the World to See: Visual Culture and the Struggle for Civil Rights* that, “By taking pictures of themselves, African Americans could participate in their own image making and thus provide what a century of mainstream culture would not: the ongoing confirmation of their own humanity, complexity, beauty, and cultural and intellectual authority.” Berger further suggests that as much as political messages and legal writing influenced change during the Civil Rights movement, images were key in combating one of the central problems of America’s racism—the problem of invisibility. Thus Black photographers like Gordon Parks and DeCarava offered a model for an aesthetic of activism, a visual culture focused on exposing racism and celebrating the identities of African Americans.

DeCarava was particularly important as an influence for Weems. He was an African American artist who rose to fame with his photographs of Black communities and jazz musicians. He was born in 1919 in Harlem and started working professionally in the arts during the 1940s after getting involved with the poster division of the Works Progress Administration (WPA). He sought an antidote to caricatures of African Americans that were present on many posters and in comics of the early twentieth century: “DeCarava, resisting explicit politicization, used photography to counter what he described as ‘Black people … not being portrayed in a serious way.’” He worked within

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this humanizing style, trying to document the lives and work of jazz musicians and other African Americans living in Harlem. In the photograph *Billie Holiday and Hazel Scott at a Party, 1957* (fig.1), DeCarava places the camera behind his figures. Scott’s back faces him as she sits at the piano, head turned and eyes closed in a manner that suggests she is feeling something beyond the space of physical existence where the two women are sitting. Holiday sits to her left in a striped dress, her eyes also closed, singing into a microphone. The image that DeCarava puts forth is almost voyeuristic and suggests an intimate moment of creation of beautiful art that the viewer is not supposed to see. These two public figures lived their lives in the spotlight. The average person only knows what the tabloids and lyrics say about Holiday and Scott, and to prove that, DeCarava has taken a photo showing how well the two women knew each other and how little the viewer knows about the situation at hand. DeCarava produces a black and white gelatin silver print using unique lighting, which gives this image a secretive and ethereal look. A lamp on the piano seems to be the only source of light. Scott’s figure is almost completely in shadow, while Holiday’s skirt is the main part of her body that is illuminated.

Art historians and Weems herself discuss DeCarava’s use of light in his Harlem photographs. He uses light in an intricate way, and by manipulating light and shadow, he is able to focus the viewer on a specific part of the human experience: “his depiction of the event is candid so atmospheric effects, such as the low lighting and the reflection of the ceiling lights onto the polished wood floor are preexisting and authentic.”23 In an interview with Ivor Miller, DeCarava discusses the importance of light not just to an

23 Stephanie James, "Extraordinary Shades of Gray," 61.
image but to his happiness and well-being as a person. He notes that he hates unnatural light and never uses flash, which is why his photographs are often so richly textured.\(^{24}\)

Weems makes note of the “deep and rich blacks” of DeCarava’s photography, which are so striking in *Billie Holiday and Hazel Scott at a Party* (fig. 1).\(^{25}\) Weems, like DeCarava, uses light in complex ways to set her stage and to emphasize the physical bodies in her camera view, like those in the black and white images and stark kitchen lighting of *The Kitchen Table Series* or in *From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried*, which takes the light that already existed in the daguerreotypes and manipulates the color to dramatize the portrait.

Both DeCarava and Weems use powerful and strong Black women and place them in a space where their image and their images challenge us and engage us in questioning what we know about them. Weems takes the stereotypes and opinions a viewer may presume and turns those assumptions on their head. Within the *Kitchen Table Series* and *From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried*, Weems works to make viewers critically think about what they know to be true and why that is, regardless of the viewers’ social identity. Both artists create intimate photographs in a domestic setting to showcase the Black experience, DeCarava in a snapshot format of peoples’ lives and Weems in a captured performative experience, to provide the art world and society in general with beautiful images of Black bodies in private spaces. As Langston Hughes

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\(^{25}\) Carrie Mae Weems and Susan Sollins, “On Photography.”
said, “Perhaps the mission of an artist is to interpret beauty to people—the beauty within themselves.”

In an obituary for DeCarava in 2009, Randy Kennedy notes that DeCarava pursued “the kind of penetrating insight and understanding of Negros which … only a Negro photographer [could] interpret.” DeCarava liked to work in the moment, documenting people through their daily lives and as he encountered them on the street. While his photographs seemed to document fleeting encounters with individuals, “the intimacy conveyed between him and his subject, whether animate or inanimate, contradicts the simple reportage often found in street photography.” His work, however, is not snapshot photography, an immediate moment that disappears as soon as the photograph is taken; instead, he records the people in his photographs in a continuous rhythm almost like that of a jazz melody or a kaleidoscope. He is able to capture a subject constantly changing and moving while just for a moment remaining constant. In a dialogue with Ron Carter, DeCarava discusses this idea of movement and the photographer piecing together snapshots to create a story-filled moment: “That changing of commonality, finding a focus for people and placing it where we would like it to be in the long run, that’s a thing only for those who really dare to make a statement.”

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28 Stephanie James, "Extraordinary Shades of Gray," 60.

*Kitchen Table Series* and *From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried* are not photographs of the moment, like DeCarava’s Harlem street photography. Weems stages the two series in deliberate fashion, yet her work offers the same kind of visual intimacy that DeCarava achieves. In *The Kitchen Table Series*, Weems seeks to normalize the Black experience in America, particularly the Black female experience, and thereby works in the same tradition of photographic portraiture as DeCarava. And like DeCarava, she melds individual photographs into a story, and her use of text in *The Kitchen Table Series* makes use of music lyrics and jazz motifs that harken back to Black traditions and a Black aesthetic she shares with DeCarava as her photographic inspiration.
The Personal is Political: *The Kitchen Table Series*

Carrie Mae Weems defines and manifests visual activism in her photography and visual media, as an analysis of her two major exhibitions demonstrates. Weems debuted *The Kitchen Table Series* in a series of four exhibits in 1990 in London, Chicago, Atlanta, and Boston and first exhibited *From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried* in 1995-96. This chapter explores the first of these two best-known bodies of work, *The Kitchen Table Series*. The series provides Weems with an opportunity to explore how art could be used to tell a story, one designed to make viewers question critical issues of race and gender, whatever their social identity. Moreover, the images are meant to make a social impact. Weems’s art is designed, as art historian Kathryn Delmez suggests, “not only to bring ignored or erased experiences to light but to provide a more multidimensional picture of humanity as a whole, a picture that ultimately will spur awareness and compassion.” Through photography, and specifically through portraiture, Weems is interested in using her own experiences as a Black woman, looking at how that experience might be either similar to or different from those of her viewers. She works to bring a larger consciousness to the people who view her images by causing them to think about their own identities and their reliance on assumptions and stereotypes about race and gender. She seems to have recognized with her very first camera, given to her by a friend in 1974, that photography could be a vehicle to make the abstract real, to make complex political and social concepts visceral and emotionally inspiring. Weems

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30 Kathryn E. Delmez, “Introduction,” 9. Delmez notes that “Weems sees herself as a storyteller, and words—either written or spoken—have played a critical role in her art.”


constructs her bodies of work to raise consciousness about the complexities of social identity, providing commentary on changes to societally imposed racial and gender identities. Weems chooses portraiture because of its focus on individuals, to construct narratives through photographic and textual mediums that challenge social norms and invite viewers of all races, ethnicities, and gender expressions to question their participation in constructing and deconstructing power, social privilege, racial identities, and gender roles.

*The Kitchen Table Series* consists of twenty photographs and fourteen text panels depicting a woman’s life on the “stage” of her kitchen. In these black and white photographs, one woman is the focus, and she is seated at the kitchen table in an intimate setting that exudes domesticity. It is a setting that allows Weems to stage a photographic play with a Black woman in the lead role. The narrative conveyed by the staged images of a woman in her kitchen immediately begins breaking down the fourth wall between the figures in the photograph—the actors in the play—and the viewers. In *Untitled: Man and Mirror*, 1990 (fig. 2), we see a woman at her table making direct eye contact with the camera and a man in a fedora and suit affectionately whispering nothings in the woman’s ear, while also surrounding her, enveloping her. This private moment with glasses, a kitchen knife, alcohol, cigarettes, and a mirror on the kitchen table is not quite as amorous as it might first appear. Weems does not look at the man holding her; she instead gazes directly at the camera and the viewer with a coy look in her eye, almost baiting the viewer to say something, to question her actions. As one of the text panels indicates, “She wasn’t about to succumb to standards of tradition which denied her a
rightful place or voice, period.” She communicates directly with her viewer while in character—her coy look in the camera acknowledges the presence of the observer. Privacy has been sacrificed. In fact, she likes the audience, and, as the text indicates, “She was a woman socially involved, loved to run her mouth, to talk things through.” The woman in this first photo provides her viewers with the “inside scoop,” the story behind the image. The man is too preoccupied to notice her relationship with the people on the other side of the camera, but we are in on the secret. As the text warns, from this very first photograph, “A thin line of difference was beginning to show itself” between the male and female perspectives, and those differences will eventually cause a permanent rift in the relationship.

The text panels play a central role in telling the story of the woman in the kitchen. According to Jennifer Blessing, “The measured photographic chronicle is countered by the raucous accompanying texts, which describe a far darker narrative echoing with a chorus of voices—these found in vernacular expressions, rhymes, and lyrics—coalescing into that of the imperfect heroine.” In the story of this woman’s narrative, the accompanying text provides more context for the photographs of the man and the woman, their relationship together, and her feelings. They offer a silent film narrative to the stills where the woman takes the stage, but it is important to note that curatorial choices

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33 Carrie Mae Weems, *The Kitchen Table Series* (Bologna, Italy: Damiani and Matsumoto Editions, 2016), 36.

34 Carrie Mae Weems, *The Kitchen Table Series*, 47.

35 Carrie Mae Weems, *The Kitchen Table Series*, 47.

36 Robin Kelsey, Katori Hall, Salamishah Tillet, Dawoud Bey, and Jennifer Blessing, “Around the Kitchen Table,” 56.
determine the placement of the texts and the photographs, so there is no easy or certain connection between image and text. One of the texts that seems to be associated with the man in the first few photographs reads: “She insisted that what he called domineering was a jacket being forced on her because he couldn’t stand the thought of the inevitable shift in the balance of power.” In this text Weems is directly addressing the idea of the woman being a caged bird in an unsatisfactory relationship. The text is from the perspective of the woman and so provides an opportunity for her to tell her own story. Love, Weems seems to suggest in both text and image, is not an imbalance of power; love is freedom and independence, and it honors the individuality the woman at the kitchen table seeks.

In the second photograph of the series (fig. 3), Untitled (Man Smoking), the man and woman take the measure of each other over a game of cards and drinks. They are engaging one another, but the game is complicated. The woman literally keeps her cards close to her vest, while the camera reveals the man’s hand. Because the woman, who is Weems, is both in front of and behind the camera, she holds the power in this moment. She looks at the man with a sideways glance, as though she is not quite sure she can trust him. The textual commentary emphasizes the game the lovers play. One page of text begins, “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.” Instead of being the ideal woman waiting for a man to sweep her off her feet, the woman wants to play the field. The text suggests that she has not yet closed the door to all the opportunities outside of

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37 Carrie Mae Weems, The Kitchen Table Series, 36.

38 Carrie Mae Weems, The Kitchen Table Series, 28.
this relationship. Through the text, we learn the woman sees power within herself. She does not want to give all her cards away, and she has concerns about what monogamy will take away from her. The man, on the other hand, “certainly knew the breadth of his own nature, so felt human nature was often in need of social control.” The man sees monogamy as the first steps towards societally deemed “marital bliss,” and so has a completely different perspective on the relationship than she does. Weems uses both image and text to display visual and verbal discontentment and a basic disconnect between male and female perspectives: “Testing the strength of the relationship in this way was a dangerous game.” The man and woman form mirror images with their similar hand gestures, both with a hand to their mouths, as if inhibiting speech and emphasizing their lack of ability to really agree or connect on the issues of control in their relationship. There is a wariness to the relationship being played out at the kitchen table, while on the wall behind the woman, Malcolm X spreads his fiery rhetoric, so at odds with the more cautious and absent Martin Luther King. Does the Malcolm X prop suggest the ways in which the woman might want to pursue freedom?

Through such props, Weems revisits the Civil Rights era, focusing on the kitchen table as a place where critical discussions were held and where key decisions were made in the 1950s and 60s. Deborah Willis notes that Weems revisits the “loss, achievements, and ideals of the past” by using her own photography to remind her viewers of the way Civil Rights-era photographers chronicled the pain, violence, and struggle of the

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40 Carrie Mae Weems, *The Kitchen Table Series*, 28.

Weems is fully aware of the power of visual media to impact public opinion. Photographs of Jim Crow signs, of Martin Luther King or Malcolm X in leadership roles, of the vast crowds at the March on Washington, and of the beatings on the Edmund Pettus Bridge helped expose human rights abuse and sway changes in the law and in attitudes. References to those events stand in the background or on the walls of the photographs in *The Kitchen Table Series*. Weems also drew inspiration from Black radicalism in the 1960s and 70s, in which photographers manifested Black pride and Black empowerment through iconic images of the Black power salute at the 1968 Summer Olympics or of Black Panther activities throughout the United States. What is distinctive about Weems’s work, however, is that she focuses not on group protest and group images but on domestic or intimate settings and on individual portraits to convey her message. Weems repurposes the White feminist battle cry championed by second-wave feminism and Carol Hanisch, whose 1970 essay is often wrongly credited with originating the phrase, “the personal is political.” Hanish explains, “It is at this point a political action to tell it like it is, to say what I really believe about my life instead of what I’ve always been told to say.” Weems does exactly that but uses her art to tell her own story, a story that was often ignored by second-wave feminism, in an effort to change American culture and open up the narrative of a Black woman in her home.

The next several photographs portray a deteriorating relationship between the man and the woman, and Weems highlights the woman’s experience and perspective. In

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42 Willis, “Translating Black Power and Beauty,” 994.
43 See Willis, “Translating Black Power and Beauty,” 994.
*Untitled (Eating Lobster)*, the woman indulges the man while denying herself (fig. 4). The man stuffs his face with lobster while she comforts or supports him, with a nurturing hand on his face, her own lobster untouched. How is she supposed to pursue her own dreams and desires while serving in her role as woman, wife, and figure of domesticity? Who is she serving and why? As one of the text panels says, “She was trying to be a good woman, a compadre, a pal, a living-doll and she was working. How could he ask for more!!”\(^\text{45}\) The act of consumption suggests that he takes and she gives, that they are engaged in a one-sided relationship that is ultimately unfulfilling for her. Significantly, a hoop with a birdcage makes its appearance for the first time in the series. The bird is in the cage, signaling the woman’s captive state. She is caught in the relationship, and she is caught in a series of expectations about how she is supposed to live her life. The presence of the hoop suggests she has spent time jumping through the hoops of what the world and the man have asked of her, hoops that supported the cage of her roles, just as the hoop holds the birdcage. The birdcage in this photograph, like several other props, is a recurring metaphor in this series, and it emphasizes the gendered expectations inherent in the narrative Weems is constructing.

The next two photographs in the series (figs. 5 and 6), both labeled *Untitled (Man Reading Newspaper)*, suggest the emotional distance beginning to develop between the man and the woman. One of the text panels indicates, “In their daily life together trouble lurked.”\(^\text{46}\) He doesn’t like her outspokenness or “her insistent demand that everything—

\(^{45}\) Carrie Mae Weems, *The Kitchen Table Series*, 36.

\(^{46}\) Carrie Mae Weems, *The Kitchen Table Series*, 35.
the flowers on the table—be viewed politically."47 The text gives voice to both the man and the woman and to their perspectives on the relationship. In both images, the man is preoccupied with the newspaper, while the woman’s loneliness is symbolized by the sterile environment. Nothing besides glasses of liquid, a pack of cigarettes, an ashtray, and the newspaper are on the table, and there are no pictures on the wall. The woman’s posture, both standing and sitting, conveys stiffness and isolation. The cards, which had formed a kind of connection and engagement between the lovers in *Untitled (Man Smoking)* (fig. 3) are packed away in their box. The game is over. As the text panel says, “Something had to give.”48 The hug in the sixth photograph, *Untitled (Man Reading Newspaper)* (fig. 7), seems somehow desperate, but also echoes the visual narrative of *Untitled (Man and Mirror)* (fig. 2). In this photograph, the woman is enveloping the man. While his arms are also around her, his eyes are peering downward. Is he still focused on the newspaper, humoring her need for affection while his attention is elsewhere? Given that the next photograph of the series, *Untitled (Woman and Phone)* (fig. 8), shows her alone, the props of wine, wineglass, and telephone suggest she has given up her independence and self-proclaimed power for monogamy and for this relationship, yet here she is waiting, depending on him to call. Weems suggests there is a tension and struggle between wanting the ones a person loves and needing to love and respect oneself.

The next three photographs in the series explore the power of female friendships. One of the text panels exclaims, “I can tell you that I sided with men so long I forgot

47 Carrie Mae Weems, *The Kitchen Table Series*, 35.
48 Carrie Mae Weems, *The Kitchen Table Series*, 35.
women . . . Biggest fool in the world. Turning my back on friends for a piece of men.”

Two women comfort Weems, whether or not it is over a frustration with the man, we do not know, but they sit in stewing anger, with the knife appearing in the middle of the table (see fig. 9, *Untitled [Woman and Phone]*) suggesting the edge of underlying emotions. The tension of the photograph with the knife is dissipated in the third photograph in this section of the series, *Untitled (Woman with Friends)* (fig. 10), where the women finally break into laughter. The ghostly exposure of the woman on the left in the third photograph is perhaps intended to speak to the ephemeral nature of the moment. The folk art on the wall behind Weems testifies to the photographer’s long-term interest in folklore, but it may also hint at the bonds of community that tie the women together. In the final photograph with another woman, Weems sits while the other woman grooms her, brushing her hair and working in the hair product on the table, the comfort of this action signaling the idea of beauty that exists throughout Weems’s work, as well as the bonding of Black women over the hair rituals that unite them.

More bonding occurs, but it is a different kind, in the next section in *The Kitchen Table Series*. This time we see the depth of the relationship this woman has with her child. The text reveals the woman’s conflicted emotions about being a mother, whether it was for herself or for her husband: “He wanted children. She didn’t. At the height of their love a child was born.” She tells us that “she loved the kid, . . . but took no deep pleasure in motherhood, it caused deflection from her own immediate desires, which pissed her off. Ha. A woman’s duty! Ha! A punishment for Eve’s sin was more like it.

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50 Carrie Mae Weems, *The Kitchen Table Series*, 60.
In *Untitled (Woman and Daughter with Makeup)* (fig. 11), we see mother and daughter together for the first time, and like the man and the woman, the photographs suggest they must come to terms with each other. The scene further explores the theme of beauty in the series, and the mirror prop again suggests self-reflection and looking at one's inner self, as it does throughout the series. The child imitates her mother in learning female ritual by putting on the make-up that becomes a way of preparing a mask for the world. Both mother and child have a mirror, symbolizing the importance of looking within as well as looking at the image that society imagines a woman, a Black woman, to have. The mirror is a recurring object throughout this series, but the camera itself is a mirror for Weems and the story she tells. Willis argues that “through notions of self-representation, Weems explores beauty, black empowerment, and a revised definition of how to revisit political moments through her photographs.”

Through this work Weems is not only commenting on social identities of gender and race, but on the larger system of power as a whole, and how it is perpetuated from one generation to the next. When an identity someone holds is part of an underrepresented community, the power dynamics shift tremendously. There are societal expectations and barriers that limit access and perpetuate inequity. Images continue to repeat patterns, as the child stands in frustration while the woman studies *Untitled (Woman with Daughter)* (fig. 12). This positioning of the two actors repeats the positioning of the woman and man in earlier photographs, with the girl’s frustration at being ignored repeating the woman’s frustration with her male partner. The disconnect between mother and daughter shows the woman’s internal

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51 Carrie Mae Weems, *The Kitchen Table Series*, 60.

52 Willis, “Translating Black Power and Beauty,” 994.
struggle between the roles she has chosen (of wife and mother) versus the role she wants to play (the woman free and independent in society). The pattern is broken, however, when a conversation occurs between woman and child, and the next image shows the girl studying just like her mother *Untitled (Woman and Daughter with Children)* (fig. 13). Weems is not only teaching the mask that is imposed on Black women, she is also instilling the value of education in the empowerment of women and emphasizing the importance of communication.

A later photo of the series, *Untitled: Woman Playing Solitaire* (fig. 14), is the same woman sitting, this time alone, in a velvet dressing gown, again always at the kitchen table, head down, posed in thought about what her next move will be in a game of solitaire. The props in this photograph include the card game, a box of chocolates, an ashtray, cigarettes, and a single glass meant for the woman and no one else. Behind her and framing her body—instead of the man who framed her body in the first photograph of the series—are two photographs on the wall as well as a hoop with a bird cage in it. All of these items create a story of singularity. The text notes that “At 38 she was beginning to feel the fullness of her woman self.”

She is alone here, but her aloneness is not quite sad or desperate for longing; rather, it has an aura of relief or contentment. The birdcage is empty, signifying she has never sought to cage a creature as she has been caged. She has let the bird go. The photograph is a visual image of Maya Angelou’s autobiography, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, or her poem, “Caged Bird,” the last stanza of which speaks to the burdens this Black woman bears:

\[
\text{The caged bird sings with} \\
\text{A fearful trill of things unknown}
\]

53 Carrie Mae Weems, *The Kitchen Table Series*, 76.
But longed for still and his
Tune is heard on the distant hill
For the caged bird sings of freedom.\(^{54}\)

This woman has spent her time with her man, family, friends, children. She has spent her time in anguish, anger, laughter, and in love. Alone with herself now, she is content and has found, through all of the expectations set upon her, a moment of peace. This photograph brings a kind of resolution to the narrative of the woman who acts out the relationships of her life.

In *The Kitchen Table Series*, Weems uses self-portraiture to comment on how Black women’s roles in the home have been perceived by mainstream American culture; her purpose is to break down stereotypes and reimagine social identity by connecting the past and the present. Secondary characters, including several men, other women, and children, appear in the photographs in succession to expand the narrative. Weems both creates and curates these photographs as if she were directing a play. Robert Storr argues that she is “the director, set designer, costumer, and star of her own unmoving pictures.”\(^{55}\) That she is constructing a play or a movie, as Storr suggests, means she controls the narrative. Art, in Weems’s work, imitates life. Weems notes in an interview with *Bomb* magazine why she chose to portray the central role herself. She explains the value of self-portraiture in terms of activism: “I use my own constructed image as a vehicle for questioning ideas about the role of tradition, the nature of family, monogamy, polygamy,


relationships between men and women, between women and their children, and between
women and other women—underscoring the critical problems and possible resolves.”
In the first photo, Untitled (Man and Mirror), (fig. 2), the woman sits at one end of the
table in front of a mirror, framed by the man leaning over her to kiss her. She is defined
by her domestic role as a wife or lover, but by the end of the series, she is comfortable in
her aloneness, playing solitaire. Weems has shifted the narrative to one of Black female
empowerment. Utilizing a mirror as a symbol for self-reflection, Weems is asking herself
and a broad and diverse set of onlookers about what they are seeing and assuming.
Mirrors are a tool used to shift focus beyond the artist and the photograph and into the
larger social and political world. Mirrors force people to face unpleasant truths. They ask
a person to reflect on the relationship between self and society and then dare to act. As
Deborah Willis argues in her essay “Photographing Between the Lines: Beauty, Politics,
and the Poetic Vision of Carrie Mae Weems,” “Mirrors are often found in Weems’s self-
portraits; she’s holding or gazing into one, or her statuesque frame is reflected in one.
Weems is searching, exploring, and examining, looking for answers and asking
questions.” She uses her work to ask the questions that are hard to ask, the questions
that one asks after facing realities in the mirror. By using portraiture, and specifically the
setting of the kitchen table, Weems is able to transport viewers into her home, and by
extension into their own homes, to look within.


57 Deborah Willis, “Photographing Between the Lines: Beauty, Politics, and the Poetic Vision of
Carrie Mae Weems,” in Carrie Mae Weems: Three Decades of Photography and Video, ed. Kathryn E.
Delmez (New Haven and London: Frist Center for the Visual Arts in association with Yale University
The woman, portrayed by Weems herself, is playing with the idea of woman as construct, as archetype. What defines a woman? How does she see herself? How do those around her see her? And what does society expect from her? Art historians have noted how central these performative aspects are to Weems’s social message. She wants to reorient the very idea of “every woman” by putting a Black woman in as the archetype. Kathryn Delmez argues that Weems believes “through the act of performance, with our own bodies, we are allowed to experience and connect the historical past to the present—to the now, to the moment. By inhabiting the moment, we live the experience; we stand in the shadows of others and come to know firsthand what is often only imagined, lost, forgotten.”

Weems works to connect systems of oppression that exist through time to highlight the work that still needs to be done and, in a way, provides her audience with a sense of agency from which to act, whatever their social position or identity.

We get the feeling we are peeking into the most intimate parts of this woman’s story and her relationships with her loved ones. The intimacy and the revelations that come with that intimacy are deliberate choices. The woman at the heart of the narrative is at once every woman—she is an individual in a historical setting, she is a lover, a mother, a friend—she is also Weems herself. Weems puts herself in the scene, playing the lead role in the narrative. By making a Black woman into the archetype, Weems is able to generate political and social messaging about the individualized empowerment needed for Black women in America. Sarah Lewis remarks in the exhibition catalog for *Kitchen*

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Table that the series “remains one of the few narrative works in the history of photography to cast a Black female protagonist in a journey towards utter empowerment.”60 Weems has taken control of the narrative and become the actor, literally and metaphorically, in this series. Toni Morrison, in her novel Beloved, published two years before The Kitchen Table Series came out, notes that “definitions belong to the definers—not the defined,”61 and Weems has claimed the power to define—to define what it means to be a woman, first and foremost, and a Black woman who shifts, in the course of the photographic narrative, from being defined to being the definer. The narrative and the process of defining social roles and identities proceeds in the narrow confines of a space that, as Andrea Kirsch argues, “is fixed rigidly in three dimensions by the immobile position of the camera/photographer/viewer, which defines the spatial breadth; by the receding table; and by the prominent verticality of the overhead light.”62 The fixed position of the camera adds to the stability and even truthfulness of the narrative because the perspective does not change no matter what is happening in the life of this woman. As Kirsh points out, the bright overhead light is harsh and reminds the viewer of an interrogation room,63 suggesting that Weems is conducting an investigation into the stereotypes and assumptions that limit the power of Black women.

60 Sarah Lewis, Carrie Mae Weems: Kitchen Table Series (Bologna, Italy: Damiani and Matsumoto, 2016), 6.


The woman in the series experiences a range of emotions from melancholy to love, loneliness to frustration, with a raw sense of self. As Robin Kelsey writes in “Around the Kitchen Table”: “The kitchen is a place of intimate habit, of sharing and aroma. Emotional distance is routine on the street, but excruciating in the kitchen.” The kitchen is where the woman puts on her make-up, her mask for the world. It is where she cooks for the family, where she experiences relationships with men and other women, where she raises her child, where she faces herself, where she expends her blood, sweat, and tears. Weems exposes the power and weight of the kitchen in the lives of women, especially Black women, and the weight is both a joy and a burden. Stereotypes, assumptions, and social expectations frequently frame the social identities of Black women. The kitchen table, for example, conjures up images of Black women as “the help,” limited to the kitchen as domestic servants. The kitchens in which they work are often not their own. *The Kitchen Table Series* reclaims the space of the kitchen and therefore the identity of the women and other people who inhabit it. In inhabiting the space, living in it, the Black woman in the series, who is both Everywoman and Weems herself, makes the space her own.

The photographs document the emotions and experiences a Black woman might go through as she comes into her own power and authority. The kitchen becomes the site for negotiating and dealing with the conflicting expectations associated with race and gender. Salamishah Tillet addresses how Weems navigates the multitude of the identities of Black femininity in the setting of the kitchen table by arguing, “Weems’s genius has

64 Robin Kelsey, Katori Hall, Salamishah Tillet, Dawoud Bey, and Jennifer Blessing, “Around the Kitchen Table,” *Aperture*, no. 223 (Summer 2016): 53.
always been to reveal, consistently and with newness, in familiar and foreign settings, what poet Elizabeth Alexander calls ‘the Black interior,’ a vision of Black life and creativity that exists ‘behind the public face of stereotype and limited imagination.’ The series confronts this public-private divide Black women experience by acknowledging that the woman’s relationships and most private moments are made public through the lens of the camera. The mirror and the make-up in the photographs with Weems and her daughter-figure are symbols of a lesson about social expectations that Black women must teach each other from one generation to the next to ensure survival in a world where Black women lack power and authority and must reclaim it in multiple ways.

Throughout *The Kitchen Table Series*, Weems puts herself in the spotlight, highlighting her most intimate moments in love, laughter, and heartbreak for the world to see. This series does not place the viewer outside; instead it is an invitation to the table, an invitation that is often forgotten for Black women in all kinds of social arenas. This invitation does not accept passivity. Weems calls on her audience to assist with her investigation into the problems of power, privilege, and identity that impact Black women. The viewer is invited to investigate the self, just as Weems does by using her own body as the subject of the series, interrogating assumptions about race and gender and how they influence everyday actions. Weems’s use of self-portraiture as a form of visual activism is an intimate use of the individual to question assumptions about race and gender. Black women become the actors, the main players, the center of the narrative, implying that they are fully represented in the power structures of American culture.

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65 Robin Kelsey, Katori Hall, Salamishah Tillet, Dawoud Bey, and Jennifer Blessing, “Around the Kitchen Table,” 54.
Appropriation and Creation: *From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried*

Weems’ first started working on her *chef d’oeuvre, From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried*, in the early 1990s, but the series first premiered in 1995-96. A collection of thirty-four images, each work can be displayed individually. Together, however, these images tell a much larger story about the history of photography and the history of exploitation of Africans and African Americans in the United States. Weems visited the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology at Harvard University in the early 1990s, where she encountered the daguerreotypes of Delia, Jack, Renty, and Drana, images of enslaved people that had been put into storage after their donation to the museum and were rediscovered in 1976. The four people in the daguerreotypes had been photographed by J.T. Zealy (1812-1893) for use in a never published racist study by nineteenth-century biologist and geologist Louis Agassiz (1807-1873). These daguerreotypes form the intellectual center of the series, and Weems, who faced some criticism for her use of such exploitive and voyeuristic images, engages in an act of reparation by appropriating and reinterpreting them. She gives back dignity to and ignites a conversation about the people whose images were taken and used in racist agendas. Weems also selected another twenty-nine images for the exhibit, and these date from the 1850s through the 1950s or 60s. The photographs are of families, soldiers, maids, and

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even Josephine Baker, the Jazz Age, American-born, world-renowned performer. Also included among the images is a carte de visite, a photographic portrait on a small calling card, of Gordon, a Black man whose tangled webs of scars from whipping circulated widely in the Civil War era as a testament to the horrors of slavery.\footnote{Frank H. Goodyear, III, “The Scourged Back: How Runaway Slave and Soldier Private Gordon Changed History,” America’s Black Holocaust Museum, accessed April 9, 2020, \url{https://abhmuseum.org/the-scourged-back-how-runaway-slave-and-soldier-private-gordon-changed-history/}.} Weems reframes these photographs by placing a mat with a circular cut-out over them and then covering them with glass on which is etched a set of accusations that provide a space for the hidden racism and bigotry in the historical photographs to be laid out in full display.

In this series Weems takes historic images of Black people out of their original contexts. Such photographs were not considered portraiture when they were taken. They originally served as sociological and anthropological arguments, in the case of the first four photographs in the series, to justify slavery or racist ideologies, but Weems manipulates them to argue for new and more fluid social identities for the Black men and women who were oppressed by a White gaze. She adds text and commentary to counteract the dehumanization that was the intent for the photographs, allowing the subjects of the photographs a voice that was not originally heard. Weems uses a text and image combination, as she did in The Kitchen Table Series, to challenge racist assumptions. She invests the images with an entirely different context and meaning by appropriating daguerreotypes and historical photographs containing racist imagery and symbolizing the oppression of Black Americans. The texts invite us to recognize the stereotypes at play and to unpack our understanding of these individuals whom Weems places in a new focus. By confronting the reinterpreted images with the texts that lie over
them, viewers of many cultures and backgrounds can be encouraged to understand their own experiences, the experiences of the people in the portraits, and history itself. That effort to reinterpret and reclaim the racist past and racist historical photography is at the heart of visual activism in From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried.

The series begins with a Nubian woman photographed in profile (fig. 16, From Here I Saw What Happened). She is nude but not naked, chin forward, dignified, looking forward.69 With her position at the beginning and the end of the series, the Nubian woman bears witness to the results of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade from the mid-nineteenth century to the 1960s. Weems tints the photograph blue, not red like the rest of the images. The blue tint soothes the eye, reading almost peacefully, while the blood red tinting of the other images suggests to the viewer the blood and horror that African Americans have and continue to endure in the United States. Weems also doubles and reverses the Nubian woman’s image, using it as the introduction and conclusion of the series. At the end, Weems suggests the Nubian woman is weeping, by using the title of her last image, And I Cried, as an effort to connect the image with a larger meaning. The Nubian woman, who is herself part of a 1925 colonialist photographic project in National Geographic,70 bears witness to the atrocities and stereotypes imposed on Black Americans. This proud woman, whose original photographic context makes her, too, a subject of the White gaze, is adapted by Weems and serves as a symbol of the African heritage of the enslaved peoples of North America. As Yxta Maya Murray suggests, the

69 The Nubian woman is from a photograph, titled Nobosodrou, Femme Mangetu taken by George Specht in 1925 for National Geographic. See Raymond, “The Crucible of Witnessing,” 35.

beginning and ending images of the Nubian woman bring “visions of an unmolested Black womanhood observing red-tinted crime.” 71 The Nubian woman is a witness rather than a voyeur, to the indignities and oppression of America’s racist past and to racist efforts, through photography, to demonstrate inequality.

The daguerreotypes of Delia, Jack, Renty, and Drana offer up images of enslaved people who had been exploited, stripped naked not for any record of who they were as individuals, but rather as proof for Louis Agassiz’s “son of Ham” theory of “separate creation.” 72 Agassiz was a Swiss-born Harvard biologist and geologist whose racist religious beliefs led him to argue polygenesis, a theory that “god had cooked up the races from entirely separate species endowing some with masterful gifts and others with more servile talents.” 73 Agassiz used physicality, correlating head size with brain size and identifying facial features with race, to argue that all humans were not equal. Weems recognized that these daguerreotypes and other photographic images of enslaved people, Civil Rights activists, and portraits of ordinary Black people emphasized just how little freedom these individuals had. She works to change the very meaning of these images and how a broad and diverse set of viewers might comprehend them. Murray argues that “Weems’ appropriation of the Agassiz daguerreotypes is a hallmark of the liberatory, anti-racist, anti-sexist, and peaceable art and activism for which she is known.” 74

71 Murray, “From Here I Saw,” 23.
72 Murray, “From Here I Saw,” 2.
74 Murray, “From Here I Saw,” 23.
herself further explains that, “I wanted to uplift them out of their original context and make them into something more than they have been. To give them a different kind of status first and foremost, and to heighten their beauty and their pain and sadness, too, from the ordeal of being photographed.”

In this series, Weems not only provides a critique of how Black individuals have been and are represented through photography, she uses “the creation of image, with a juxtaposed text in an activist form” to allow viewers to experience a larger consciousness-raising about the spaces that both the photographs and the viewers occupy, no matter their social identity or experience. The series critiques, contests, and undermines traditional assumptions underlying racial history and representation in the United States.

The first four images of the series after the Nubian woman, You Became a Scientific Profile, A Negroid Type, An Anthropological Debate, and A Photographic Subject (figs. 17-20), are the daguerreotypes Weems found at Harvard, the ones J.T. Zealy took for Agassiz’s study. The first Harvard image, You Became a Scientific Profile, is of the woman named Delia in profile (fig. 17). In a dehumanizing investigation, Zealy stripped these four people naked of their clothes and their personhood, photographing them in profile and frontal view as if they were part of a scientific display. In You Became A Scientific Profile, Delia’s body in profile is similar to the Nubian woman’s pose, but in emotion and impact they are considerably different, as Weems emphasizes by juxtaposing the two images. While the Nubian woman, Nobosodrou, might also be


seen as exploitive, since it comes from a 1925 *National Geographic* photograph,
Weems’s placement of the two images suggests she sees the photographs of Nobosodrou
and Delia very differently. The two women are both photographed from torso to head and
both are naked, but Delia’s eyes are downcast, as is her head, a sign that freedom of
motion and action have been stripped away from her, in contrast to the Nubian woman,
who is proudly forward looking, with her head upright. The difference is in the chins,
with Nobosodrou’s forward. The image of the Nubian woman lacks the circular mat,
signifying that Weems sees her in a different way; Weems decides not to reframe her,
although she may be reinterpreted. She looks like she is free, living out in the open. The
background is blurred so we cannot tell exactly where she is, but there is a considerable
contrast to the studio in which Delia’s photo was taken. The matting and the studio
setting of the original daguerreotype create a kind of cage that further emphasizes Delia’s
lack of freedom and her lack of choice. Weems emphasizes that Delia is on display by
deliberately pointing out the context of the original photograph.

The process by which Weems appropriates and reinterprets the images is central
to the message of the series. Weems wants her audience to recognize that these images
are coming specifically from a history of oppression and violence, from a place where
humanity is ripped away from the subject. Similar to Roy DeCarava’s activist
photography and her own *Kitchen Table Series*, Weems works with black and white
images that connect to the past. The stark difference of black and white, even with the
blood red tint, offers a witnessing of history and a creation of a new history
simultaneously. She places mats, with a circular window cut out of the middle, over the
historical photos, providing a scope into the photographs, which serves the purpose of
narrowing the viewer’s focus to the human beings. This hyper-concentration is intentional; she focuses only on the people at hand—their faces, their clothing or lack thereof. The etching on the glass further distances the new creation from the original. Weems herself notes that the series of images form “three narratives that are working simultaneously and then the individual photographs for the most part stand alone as individual units . . . singular moments that make a more complex story.”

She comments that this series works in the same way film functions. While *The Kitchen Table Series* works as a staged, silent film, which Weems directs, manages, and performs among a cast of characters, *From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried* is a different kind of narrative. Weems uses the images as stills, using the mats as if she were looking through the lens of the camera to focus on the individuals and the stereotypes revealed in the original photographs. Instead of performing herself, as she does in *The Kitchen Table Series*, her act of recontextualization is the performance.

The hair of Delia and the Nubian woman also add to the contrast of their circumstances. Black women’s hair has been long commented on by society and is often used as a feature to isolate and separate Black women from societal standards of beauty. Hair in these two photographs relates to the idea of beauty in *The Kitchen Table Series*, where the woman teaches her daughter how to conform to traditional notions of beauty in front of the mirror—it signifies a facade put on for the world. In these two images in *From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried*, we see that Delia’s hair is shorn, perhaps by her because the circumstances of her slavery or perhaps it was shorn for her.

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Nobosodrou’s hair is bound up in a style that suggests her traditional and cultural standard. Her hair is dynamic, allowing her and her body to fill the negative space that is the blurred background. Her hair balances her chin, creating a portrait of a woman who is proud of her heritage. Delia’s clothes are stripped away. Her nakedness, combined with her posture, suggests a forced vulnerability. The viewer is allowed to see her body—and seemingly not by her own will. There is a voyeuristic and predatory feeling in the original daguerreotype that Weems emphasizes with the circular lens-like format of the mat. Nobosodrou is also nude, with breasts revealed, but the combination of chin and breasts create a forward motion and assertiveness that is different from Delia’s passive stance. Delia’s image, with its accusatory title, *You Became a Scientific Profile*, suggests that she has been abused and humiliated by the systems of oppression that have consigned her to being a scientific subject, stripped of her heritage and origins, stripped of dignity and exposed to what was originally a White male gaze. The placement of her photograph next to the Nubian woman emphasizes the difference between Delia’s persecution and the African woman’s pride.

In the thirteenth image of the series, *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* (fig. 21), Weems has appropriated a famous *carte de visite*, a popular photographic format of the nineteenth century, an image that was originally printed on thin paper and then pasted onto a thicker card. Abolitionists used *cartes de visite* to advertise the horrors of slavery and to provoke an emotional reaction from the American public. 78 They could sell them cheaply or give them away,

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78 Mia Bagneris, Class Lecture, Introduction to African American Art and Visual Culture from Tulane University, New Orleans, LA, December 30, 2019.
and they could distribute them widely. This particular image, also known by the title “The Scourged Back,” is of a man named Gordon, an escaped slave whose scars from whipping display the physical violence against him as a larger symbol of the torment of Black bodies. While the intent is much different from that of the Harvard daguerreotypes of Delia and others, this photo, like the daguerreotypes, showcases the mistreatment of a Black body. Again, Weems introduces a voyeuristic element to the image through the mat. We stare at a man’s body, gazing at intimate scars that were meant to elicit an emotional response. The artist helps us be aware that even photographic histories that may have had a positive intent could still be exploitive. Weems suggests that Black bodies and the pain they endured were still being used by White photographers and viewers—this time in the cause of supporting equality rather than in the cause of establishing inequality.

The title of this work references Duke Ellington and Billie Holiday, famous Black musicians, and Holiday’s “Strange Fruit,” a song that worked to “expose American racism and the lynching that was occurring throughout the country.” 79 The words “black and tanned” in the title are not only a reference to Gordon’s physical state, but also to Ellington’s 1929 short film Black and Tan, which chronicles the rise of African American performing artists in the Harlem Renaissance. 80 Ellington and Holiday worked together on Ellington’s 1934 film Black Symphony, and Roy DeCarava, one of Weems’s photographic inspirations, photographed both musicians. Gordon’s whipped back assisted


the abolitionist movement (“wind of change”), but despite the power of the Civil War and the Emancipation Proclamation, there was not a true emancipation of enslaved peoples. Continuing through Reconstruction and beyond, Jim Crow Laws and abysmal conditions toward people of color acts including acts like lynching, continued a history of physical violence towards black bodies and a celebration of white supremacy. The song caused an outrage; people both supported and were appalled by it. It represented a reckoning, a call to arms, and a call to mourning.81 Weems comments on the suffering that Black individuals have been subject to throughout history by linking the carte de visite of Gordon to the lynching that Holiday so hauntingly croons about. In this historiographical connection, Weems creates her own work about performance, action, and reckoning. She acknowledges the power of activism through portraits and words.

Weems continues the performative aspects of this series in the image of Josephine Baker, You Became An Accomplice (fig. 22), where she takes center stage. Her head is down cast, her face with heavy makeup on display, while wearing an evening gown. We see her in a down moment, though she has all the accoutrements of being on the stage that evening. Josephine Baker came to live in Harlem after moving during the Great Migration. Although she was a fantastic chorus girl, she was never a leading lady in New York, and it took moving to Paris for her stardom to blossom. In France, she became a token for Black American “culture.” The people who came to see her observed a sex symbol, not a serious star. One of these performances involved her wearing a banana skirt. The dance occurred in a jungle setting with Baker wearing a skirt made of bananas.

Although she sought to escape the racism of America, she ends up in a colonizing nation, portraying a character that associates blackness and Africa as a continent with “primitiveness” and “caricatured existence.” While some saw Baker as a sellout to White audiences who capitalized on racist stereotypes, she knew exactly what she was doing. The imagery and symbolism of the banana costume exemplifies that. She wears a banana skirt full of phallic connotations, performing in front of European men who beg her for attention. She alone actually holds the power. With this skirt on her body she herself is performing a sort of reclaiming exercise, much as Weems reclaims the historical photographs. The title, *You Became An Accomplice* alludes to the naysayers who saw Baker as a sellout for the White male gaze, but they themselves did not realize what Baker herself knew. In this work Weems is providing a double mirror of sorts, a common symbol in Weems work, into Baker’s world. The viewer is allowed to see beneath the facade into the toll it takes to continuously put on a show, a theme that resonates with *The Kitchen Table Series*. But there is also a mirror effect; the viewer can see their own reflection in the glass, forcing them to confront their own identity in relationship to the people in Weems’s photographs. Our reflections may make us victims, accomplices, or both in the narratives Weems confronts.82

The glass not only serves as a mirror but also provides the vehicle through which Weems adds her political and social commentary. The etching of the texts onto the sandblasted glass gives the words a kind of permanence. In the context of Weems’s exhibition, the text is attached to each image, providing a central element to the narrative of the series as a whole. Weems describes the text in *From Here I Saw What Happened*

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82 Mia Bagneris, Class Lecture.
and I Cried as having a “rhythm . . . that allows for the image to be amplified.” The artist is no stranger to the use of poems and folktales throughout her oeuvre, and her use of such texts is in keeping with her graduate work in American folklore at UC Berkeley.

In many of her exhibitions and art works, including The Kitchen Table Series and From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried, Weems explores the concept of the photographs and texts serving not only as potential transmitters of folklore but also as a form of folklore because of their inherent accessibility and association with everyday life. She incorporates folklore, poetry, and lyrics in the texts of The Kitchen Table Series, where she is using bounce and movement to dive deeper into her narrative. In From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried, the text associated with the red images gives a stronger voice to the people in the portraits. The text contributes to the rhythm of the series, and the words in the series can be presented as a kind of prose-poem:

From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried/
You Became A Scientific Profile/
A Negroid Type/
An Anthropological Debate/
& A Photographic Subject/
You Became Mammie, Mama, Mother & Then, Yes, Confidant-HA/
Descending the Throne You Became Foot Soldier & Cook/
You Became Uncle Tom John & Clemens’ Jim/
Drivers/
Riders & men of Letters/
You Became A Whisper A Symbol Of A Mighty Voyage & By The Sweat Of Your Brow You Laboured For Self Family & Others/
For Your Names You Took Hope and Humble/
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/

83 Getty Museum, “Carrie Mae Weems.”

84 Carrie Mae Weems and Marie T. Cochrane, “At the Table,” The Georgia Review 48, No. 4 (Winter 1994): 711; Susan Kismaric calls the text in From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried a “sad poem that asks us to confront our own prejudices and to question our relation to the all too familiar visual history on display” (Susan Kismaric, “The Path of Resistance,” MoMA 3, no. 9 (December 2000): 9).
Born With a Veil You Became Root Worker JuJu Mama Voodoo Queen Hoodoo Doctor/
Some Said You Were the Spitting Image of Evil/
You Became Playmate to the Patriarch/
And Their Daughter/
You Became An Accomplice/
(Score)/
Out of Deep Rivers Mixed- Matched Mulattos A Variety Of Types Mind
You - HA Sprang Up Everywhere/
Your Resistance Was Found In The Food You Placed On Your Master’s Table- HA/
You Became The Joker’s Joke &/
Anything But What You Were HA/
Some Laughed Long & Hard & Loud/
Other Said “Only Thing A N***** Could Do Was Shine My Shoes”/
You Became Boots, Spade, and C**ns/
Restless After The Longest Winter You Marched & Marched & Marched/
In Your Sing Song Prayer You Asked Didn’t My Lord Deliver Daniel?/
And I Cried

Repetition, a classic tool used in African American preaching, public speaking, and poetry, is highly visible in this “poem.” When seen as a single text, the structure of the series becomes evident through the repetition. The titles of the first four images after the Nubian woman, for example, are grouped together grammatically in the poem, beginning with the subject and verb, “You Became.” “You Became,” repeated eight times in the poem, signals the start of each new grouping of photographs. The second group of images starting with “You Became” deals with the functional roles Black men and women played in society and the work they were limited to in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century American culture. The third “You Became” grouping specifically addresses the gendered and sexualized positions of Black women in relationship to men, especially White men. The phrase “You Became” is reminiscent of the texts used by other mass media artists and visual activists like Barbara Kruger. Phrases beginning with “you” are used by so-called “appropriation artists” who overlay media images with slogans and
overtly political phrases like “Your body is a battleground” to confront social identities and “[skew] representations of reality.”\textsuperscript{85} Such combinations of text and image are meant to raise questions about society and identity and are meant to confront the viewer.

Another form of repetition occurs in Weems’s consistent use of the breathy syllable “HA” throughout the text. This exclamation is used regularly in the texts of both \textit{The Kitchen Table Series} and \textit{From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried}. Weems’s use of “HA” is her own commentary on and an ironic statement about the stereotypes she is trying to expose. This explosive word emphasizes the forced roleplaying pushed onto Black people in the images she uses in both exhibitions. Weems’s use of text and image to provide space for individuals and their stories to come to life, when they have traditionally been underrepresented and silenced throughout history, is a form of visual activism, in which visual culture promotes a more in-depth understanding of socially embedded standards of racism and bigotry by viewers, regardless of their social identity.

In \textit{From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried}, Weems uses portraiture to not only document Black identity throughout American history and critique the representation of Black people in the American photographic tradition, she also uses it to unpack the larger implications of race and gender that continue to impact society today. In a \textit{New York Times} article about their exhibition \textit{Somnyama Ngonyama, Hail the Dark Lioness}, Zanele Muholi states, “Since the 19th century, the photographic portrait has allowed black people to represent themselves as they want to be seen, not how others pigeonhole or even dismiss them.” Muholi explains the purpose of visual activism in

terms very similar to those of Weems in *The Kitchen Table Series*: “The series touches on beauty, relates to historical incidents, giving affirmation to those who are doubting—whenever they speak to themselves, when they look in the mirror—to say, ‘You are worthy, you count, nobody has the right to undermine you: because of your being, because of your race, because of your gender expression, because of your sexuality, because of all that you are.’”

86 This social and political message applies directly to Weems’s *From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried*. She appropriates images meant to undermine and oppress and turns them into artistic forces to be reckoned with. The images in *From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried* are not faces that can be passed by; Weems, with her tints and texts and her sequencing of difficult images, does not allow that. We are confronted by the faces and the conversations they raise so that we will confront society at large.

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86 Maurice Berger, “Zanele Muholi.”
Conclusion: Visual Activism and Portraiture in the Work of Carrie Mae Weems

What Carrie Mae Weems, Roy DeCarava, and Zanele Muholi all have in common is their effort to create beautiful images of Black bodies and thereby to expand the definitions of photographic history and racial history in American culture and society. Each artist engages in political discourse and social commentary through their images, creating both visual culture and visual activism. Weems and other Black photographers like DeCarava and Muholi work in a black and white medium throughout different decades of the last 75 years to make a historiographical point about the lack of positive and commanding representations of Black people, so they work on portraits that personalize the photographs. We see intimate photos from all three artists that let the viewer be a witness to the lives and experiences of the people in their photographs, but the context of each artist and their style is completely different.

I argue throughout this paper that Weems’s work is visual activism. This terminology arises out of Zanele Mulholi’s work and the work of the artists discussed at the 2014 SFMOMA symposium. Those artists continue to encourage visual culture and its activist expression to evolve and meet new social needs. Muholi makes an important point in coining the phrase, because they open up a discussion about how so many artists who hold underrepresented identities work. Weems’s art is deliberately assembled to prompt conversation, and the familiar quality and themes of her images in both series have a performative aspect. Housed in the Harvard University archives and in other collections, the antebellum images of Black enslaved people have often been displayed in public, and like the carte de visite of the former slave Gordon, they resonate widely in American art. The Kitchen Table Series images are familiar because they portray
characters in a recognizable domestic drama. The images of these series engage in visual activism by not only acknowledging a racist past but also by calling on viewers to acknowledge the implications of this past and what it means for the present. Her works prompt consciousness-raising among viewers by creating positive images of Black bodies, particularly Black women. These images also reverse racist and oppressive stereotypes and confront the messages of those images head on.

Weems’s *The Kitchen Table Series* and *From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried* use text and image to tell a larger story about race and representation. In these two series Weems takes different approaches to portraiture and photography. *The Kitchen Table Series* features Weems as both artist and actor, allowing herself to participate in and comment on the stories of gender and relationships she tells. *From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried*, however, uses pre-existing images, ones that Weems has found and appropriated, but she transforms the images and tells a new story about their meaning and value. In the second series, she removes herself as a visual participant, but she nonetheless makes her presence felt as creator, by using color, matting, sequencing, and text to build a work of art that reclaims power and dignity for silenced, oppressed, and misrepresented Black Americans. Weems is an artist and a storyteller. Through her visual images and texts, she uses portraits to make the personal political, she appropriates and creates, and in the process engages her viewers in a difficult dialogue about race, gender, and American history. The politicization of art is crucial to the definition of visual activism and to the work of Carrie Mae Weems in *The Kitchen Table Series* and *From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried*. 
FIGURES

Figure 1: Roy DeCarava, *Billie Holiday and Hazel Scott at a Party, 1957*, Gelatin silver print, 25.4 x 32.4 cm. (10 x 12.8 in.), accessed at http://www.artnet.com/artists/roy-decarava/billie-holiday-and-hazel-scott-at-a-party-4eCHv5LmIIs96oMFzr85Jvg2.

Figure 2: Carrie Mae Weems, *Untitled (Man and Mirror), The Kitchen Table Series*, 1990, Gelatin silver print, 27 ¼ x 27 ¼ inches, accessed at http://carriemaeweems.net/galleries/kitchen-table.html.
Figure 3: *Untitled (Man Smoking)*, *The Kitchen Table Series*, 1990, Gelatin silver print, 27 ⅛ × 27 ⅛ inches, accessed at http://carriemaeweems.net/galleries/kitchen-table.html.

Figure 4: *Untitled (Eating Lobster)*, *The Kitchen Table Series*, 1990, Gelatin silver print, 27 ¼ × 27 ¼ inches, accessed at http://carriemaeweems.net/galleries/kitchen-table.html.
Figure 5: *Untitled (Man Reading Newspaper)*, triptych, *The Kitchen Table Series*, 1990, Gelatin silver print, 27 ¼ x 27 ¼ inches, accessed at [http://carriemaeweems.net/galleries/kitchen-table.html](http://carriemaeweems.net/galleries/kitchen-table.html).

Figure 6: *Untitled (Man Reading Newspaper)*, triptych, *The Kitchen Table Series*, 1990, Gelatin silver print, 27 ¼ x 27 ¼ inches, accessed at [http://carriemaeweems.net/galleries/kitchen-table.html](http://carriemaeweems.net/galleries/kitchen-table.html).
Figure 7: *Untitled (Man Reading Newspaper)*, triptych, *Kitchen Table Series*, 1990, Gelatin silver print, 27 ¼ x 27 ¼ inches, accessed at [http://carriemaeweems.net/galleries/kitchen-table.html](http://carriemaeweems.net/galleries/kitchen-table.html).

Figure 8: *Untitled (Woman and Phone)*, *The Kitchen Table Series*, 1990, Gelatin silver print, 27 ¼ x 27 ¼ inches, accessed at [http://carriemaeweems.net/galleries/kitchen-table.html](http://carriemaeweems.net/galleries/kitchen-table.html).
Figure 9: *Untitled (Woman with Friends)*, triptych, *The Kitchen Table Series*, 1990, Gelatin silver print, 27 ¼ x 27 ¼ inches, accessed at [http://carriemaeweems.net/galleries/kitchen-table.html](http://carriemaeweems.net/galleries/kitchen-table.html).

Figure 10: *Untitled (Woman with Friends)*, triptych, *The Kitchen Table Series*, 1990, Gelatin silver print, 27 ¼ x 27 ¼ inches, accessed at [http://carriemaeweems.net/galleries/kitchen-table.html](http://carriemaeweems.net/galleries/kitchen-table.html).
Figure 11: *Untitled (Woman and Daughter with Makeup)*, triptych, *The Kitchen Table Series*, 1990, Gelatin silver print, 27⅛ x 27⅛ inches, accessed at http://carriemaeweems.net/galleries/kitchen-table.html.

![Image of a woman and a daughter applying makeup]

Figure 12: *Untitled (Woman with Daughter)*, *The Kitchen Table Series*, 1990, Gelatin silver print, 27⅛ x 27⅛ inches, accessed at http://carriemaeweems.net/galleries/kitchen-table.html.

![Image of a woman sitting at a table with a child standing nearby]
Figure 13: *Untitled (Woman with Daughter), The Kitchen Table Series*, 1990, Gelatin silver print, 27 ¼ x 27 ¼ inches, accessed at [http://carriemaeweems.net/galleries/kitchen-table.html](http://carriemaeweems.net/galleries/kitchen-table.html).

Figure 14: *Untitled (Woman and Daughter with Children), The Kitchen Table Series*, 1990, Gelatin silver print, 27 ¼ x 27 ¼ inches, accessed at [http://carriemaeweems.net/galleries/kitchen-table.html](http://carriemaeweems.net/galleries/kitchen-table.html).
Figure 15: *Untitled (Woman Playing Solitaire)*, *The Kitchen Table Series*, 1990, Gelatin silver print, 27 ¼ x 27 ¼ inches, accessed at [http://carriemaeweems.net/galleries/kitchen-table.html](http://carriemaeweems.net/galleries/kitchen-table.html).

![Figure 15](image)

Figure 16: *From Here I Saw What Happened, From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried*, 1995-1996, chromagenic color print with sand-blasted text on glass, 43 ½ x 33 ½ inches, accessed at [http://carriemaeweems.net/galleries/from-here.html](http://carriemaeweems.net/galleries/from-here.html).

![Figure 16](image)
Figure 17: *From Here I Saw What Happened, From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried*, 1995-1996, chromogenic color print with sand-blasted text on glass, 22 x 26 ¾ inches, accessed at [http://carriemaeweems.net/galleries/from-here.html](http://carriemaeweems.net/galleries/from-here.html).

Figure 18: *A Negroid Type, From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried*, 1995-1996, chromogenic color print with sand-blasted text on glass, 22 x 26 ¾ inches, accessed at [http://carriemaeweems.net/galleries/from-here.html](http://carriemaeweems.net/galleries/from-here.html).

Figure 20: *& A Photographic Subject, From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried*, 1995-1996, chromogenic color print with sand-blasted text on glass, 22 x 26 ¾ inches, accessed at [http://carriemaeweems.net/galleries/from-here.html](http://carriemaeweems.net/galleries/from-here.html).
Figure 21: *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, From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried*, 1995-1996, chromagenic color print with sand-blasted text on glass, 26 ¾ x 22 inches, accessed at http://carriemaeweems.net/galleries/from-here.html.


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