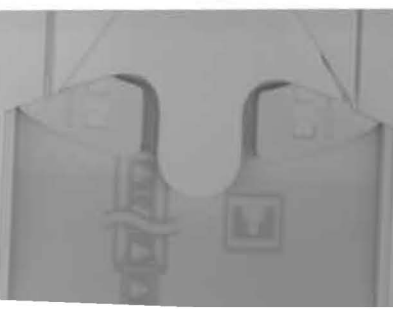


**Andrea Kirsh  
Susan Fisher Sterling**

# **CARRIE MAE WEEMS**

**The National Museum of Women in the Arts • Washington, D.C.**

**Dacus Library  
Winthrop University  
Rock Hill, S. C. 29733**



Andrea Kirsh

Though others know her as an artist or photographer, Carrie Mae Weems describes herself as an "image maker." The term, with its baggage of popular and commercial connotations, is crucial to Weems's task. Since 1976, when a friend gave her a camera, she has generated a sequence of images reflecting her concern with the world around her—with the nature of "our humanity, our plight as human beings."<sup>1</sup> She has focused on the ways in which images shape our perception of color, gender and class. Surveying the development of her work, we can see her exploring the existing genres of photographic imagery. She has looked at their uses in artistic, commercial and popular contexts, the work of both amateurs and professionals. With great subtlety, complexity and wit, Weems has manipulated a variety of photographic conventions, playing with their abstractions and adapting them to her own use.

Weems came to her studies in photography as a mature student, entering the B.F.A. program at the California Institute of the Arts (known as CalArts) in 1979, at the age of twenty-seven. By that time she had professional experience in modern dance; a progression of unskilled and semi-skilled jobs on farms and in restaurants, factories and offices; and extensive grass-roots political experience in socialist and feminist organizations. She dates her decision to become a full-time student to

a pervasive crisis in left-wing politics during the late 1970s.

At CalArts, Weems photographed African American subjects, and found that neither her professors nor her fellow students in the photography department offered any real critical response to her work. The professors she remembers as being most influential taught literature, folklore and writing.

Weems went to the University of California, San Diego, for her M.F.A. in 1982 at the encouragement of Ulysses Jenkins, a black artist on the faculty. At San Diego she met Fred Lonidier, who was the first photography professor to respond with serious criticism of her work. He forced her to address a series of questions about documentary photography that would become topics of general interest to the art world in the 1980s: Who makes the images? Who are the subjects? Who is the intended audience? While these questions have become central to recent Postmodern art criticism, for an artist of color, they have a longer history.

As a black woman photographing her own community, Weems found few precedents.<sup>2</sup> The tradition of documentary photography within which she began her investigations is primarily one of describing the "other," whether nation, class, gender or race. The *Black Photographers Annual*, published intermittently from 1972 to 1980 by Joe Crawford in Brooklyn,

Fig. 1  
*Denise, NYC*. 1978  
Silver print, 8 x 10 in.

**"I was very much interested in documentary photography as a vehicle for expression, as a political tool. It was a way of capturing the human condition."**

would reveal a tradition of photography of blacks, by blacks. The tradition encompassed three generations of photographers who documented everyday life in Harlem, as well as younger photographers working in urban and rural communities across the country. The first issue of *Black Photographers Annual*<sup>3</sup> featured the work of James Van Der Zee, a commercial photographer whose studio recorded images of Harlem's elite, including many figures from the Harlem Renaissance. Van Der Zee's work reached a wider audience, black and white, when the Metropolitan Museum of Art included it in its controversial exhibition *Harlem on My Mind* in 1969.

A more immediate model for Weems was Roy DeCarava, a painter who turned to photography in 1947. DeCarava served

as a mentor to the younger photographers, the third Harlem generation, who formed the Kamoinge Workshop in 1961. This younger group, which included Anthony Barboza, Louis Draper and Shawn Walker, was explicitly committed to producing photography that worked toward social change by generating a sense of pride and dignity within the black community. DeCarava's work would serve as a major inspiration to Carrie Mae Weems. She admired his commitment to portraying the life of his own neighborhood. She also was drawn to the formal poetry of his imagery, which reflects the beauty he sees in his subjects—his own people. DeCarava is certainly an honored forebear of much of the exquisite printing and formal rigor of Weems's work. In her narrative series (*Family Pictures and Stories* and *Untitled*) we see a loving homage to *The Sweet Flypaper of Life*, the 1955 collection of DeCarava's photographs for which Langston Hughes wrote a text that threads the pictures into a family reminiscence told by an imagined narrator.

*"I was very much interested in documentary photography as a vehicle for expression, as a political tool. It was a way of capturing the human condition."*<sup>4</sup>

Weems's earliest body of work, the *Environmental Portraits* (figs. 1-2), came out of the mainstream of documentary photography. She began it in 1978 with shots taken in Portland, Oregon, her hometown, and in New York, where she lived intermittently. She traveled to Mexico and Fiji before returning to Southern California to attend CalArts. The trip produced highly accomplished street photography—a group of Fijian schoolgirls in white uniforms, one of whom turns toward the camera; a mother with a child on her hip standing outside their Tijuana home. These photographs are informed by a tradition that stretches from Henri Cartier-Bresson to Garry Winogrand. Their images speak of a brief moment in time, implying that the subjects were captured too fleetingly to dissemble, and that these slices of life contain unedited truths.

In the work that followed, we sense that the questions first posed by Fred



Fig. 2  
*Girls on Bus, NYC, 1977*  
Silver print, 8 x 10 in.





Fig. 3  
*S.E. San Diego*  
*Kermit*, 1983 (detail)  
 Silver print, 14 x 17 in.

Lonidier had returned: Images by whom? Of whom? For whom? Carrie Mae Weems turned to a subject closer to home, the inner-city black neighborhood of south-east San Diego. Weems roamed through the area, stopping at street corners, pool halls, churches. The series *S.E. San Diego*, shot between 1983 and 1985 (fig. 3), records sites of the social rather than the personal life of the community, which Weems had portrayed in *Environmental Portraits*. It also explores the neighborhood's home-grown institutions, little frequented by outsiders. *S.E. San Diego* marks the beginning of a narrative emphasis that would recur in Weems's photographs and in her text (which she added later, after she had developed the use of images and text in *Family Pictures and Stories*).

Weems was closer to her subjects in southeast San Diego, but still an outsider. As a student of folklore and anthropology, she was well aware of the inherent problem for the outsider, even a close outsider, in recording a culture. Weems has warmly acknowledged the influence on her work of the writer and anthropologist Zora Neale Hurston. When Hurston was collecting stories from rural Florida, which she published in *Mules and Men*, her subjects had offered to give her lies, if lies were what she wanted. At a later point in

her career Carrie Mae Weems would decide that "lies" and fictions have a lot of truth to tell; but for the moment, she decided to look at her own.

*"I wanted to dig in my own backyard."*<sup>5</sup>

If the *Environmental Portraits* and the *S.E. San Diego* series were attempts to explore the uses of straight documentary to tell a story, *Family Pictures and Stories* (1978–84) suggests the format of the family photo album (plates 1–8). The personal is emphasized not only by the choice of subject—Weems's own family—but by the accompanying narratives, which take the form of written captions and two audio-tapes. All of the narratives are in the first person. Here the photographer is fully identified with her subjects. We sense her involvement in the abandoned pose of her mother, arms thrown wide (plate 2), and the intimacy of a kitchen scene in which the photographer is clearly a part of the family, standing just across the table from her sisters and nieces (plate 7).

Weems has said that the series was prompted, in part, by the Moynihan Report,<sup>6</sup> which characterized the black family as being in crisis and suggested that a matriarchal system was partly responsible. Although the report was more than a decade old, these were still potent issues. In *Family Pictures and Stories*, Weems explores the means by which her family passes on its history. On the accompanying audiotapes she recounts stories from a variety of sources: some are from interviews, dated and cited with academic precision, others she acknowledges as hearsay. The complexity of the work comes partly from the unruliness of life and Weems's refusal to edit out those stories that are not entirely flattering. We hear of four generations, displaced by poverty and racism, telling of family gatherings and domestic violence. We see a large, supportive clan, including a mother baffled by the teenage pregnancies of two daughters and brothers who are, themselves, affectionate young fathers. Weems's father tells stories of his rural, impoverished youth in response to his children's requests. He is close to his son, yet pulls a gun on him in the midst

**"I wanted to dig in my own backyard."**



Fig. 4  
*Family Pictures and Stories*  
*Mom and Dad with grandkids,*  
 1982-84 (detail)  
 Silver print, 13 x 8½ in.

of a drunken fight. This is not a one-dimensional picture of family life, simplified and prettified in the name of black pride. Weems's exposure of her family's struggles and problems, along with their resilience and affection, develops a multi-dimensional portrait. She is confident enough to reveal the more complex truth.

Carrie Mae Weems tells her own story as a consciously political act, defying inaccurate government sociology. The first-person perspective is crucial, since the personal narratives have a subversive power precisely when the "official" histories create distorted records or write a people out of existence. Weems uses the 35mm format, the informality of the "snapshots" and the first-person viewpoint to construct an "alternative" history which implicitly questions the third-person "objectivity" of official portrayals. *Family Pictures and Stories* can also be seen as a response or reproach to documentaries of

black America by white photographers; these include Photo League projects of the 1930s, such as Aaron Siskind's *Harlem Document*, and Bruce Davidson's *East 100th Street* of 1970. Their representations were clearly made from outside the community, and Weems thinks they present distorted views.

In *Family Pictures and Stories*, Weems for the first time introduces text, in the form of captions beneath the images. This device will become increasingly important to her. Both the audiotapes and the text in this series add an authorial voice, directing the viewer's reading of the photographs and adding more information than the pictures can provide. The use of captions and text to accompany a photo documentary has a long history. It encompasses pioneering works published as tracts, such as Jacob Riis's *How the Other Half Lives*, and finds its most complex expression in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* by James Agee and Walker Evans. A particularly potent source for Weems, in both its photographs and text, was *12 Million Black Voices*, Richard Wright's 1941 narrative accompanying a selection of Farm Security Administration photographs. The book charted the progress to the northern cities of Chicago, Detroit and Washington by Wright and an entire generation of southern, rural blacks. In *Family Pictures and Stories* the Weems and Polk families follow the same migration. Later still Wright's title would echo in Weems's installation *And 22 Million Very Tired and Very Angry People*.

Up to this point Weems's work was produced with a 35mm camera, consistent with its aesthetic of informality, temporality and mobility. In the work that follows she turned to the use of a larger format (2 1/2 x 2 1/2 in.) negative and explored its potential for carefully posed subjects and large, high-resolution prints. In discussing the change, Weems said she was challenged by the demands of having only twelve exposures on a roll of film (instead of thirty-six) and the concomitant need to make rigorous choices. She also expressed her personal preference for the square format. The change in format also was tied to her subject matter, which increasingly responded to the large format



and highly posed imagery of the commercial world and popular culture.

*"Mirror, mirror on the wall, who's the finest of them all? . . . Snow White, you black bitch, and don't you forget it!!!"*<sup>7</sup>

While attempting to understand her own family through the series *Family Pictures and Stories*, Weems became increasingly interested in storytelling and folklore. She decided to pursue this interest at the University of California, Berkeley, where she entered a master's program in 1984. Initially she saw the study of folklore as independent of her work as a photographer. Weems credits Alan Dundes, whose *Urban Folklore from the Paperwork Empire* was a pioneering work in expanding folklore from the study of strictly verbal traditions to include visual material, with helping her see that photography could be studied as folklore.<sup>8</sup> She was drawn to folklore's uncensored quality and particularly to the large collection of jokes in the archives of Berkeley's Folklore Program. Weems sees jokes as a social barometer and as a socially sanctioned way to discuss topics that, while of obvious current interest, would otherwise be considered unmentionable.

Folklore offered her a way to cut through political theory and to move on to how people feel, to "real facts by real people," she says. The legacy of folklore to her artwork appears most clearly in the recurrence of themes drawn from folk sources, in her tendency to choose subjects on the margins of social acceptability and, more subtly, in her insistence on establishing an alternative, grass-roots history that counters the authority of official history.

In 1987 she began to explore the implications of racist humor in the series of works titled *Ain't Jokin* (plates 9–13), another series of captioned photographs. While the texts in *Family Pictures and Stories* allowed Weems to add more information to her visual imagery, here they become a powerful vehicle for ironic contrast, which she manipulates to challenge the viewers' stereotypes.

In plate 9 a woman's eyes engage ours, her hand half covering her mouth.

She has the introspective expression that is familiar from magazine and newspaper ads, in which the text suggests the woman's problem, then provides the solution in the sponsor's product. The woman is young and comely, so the fried chicken leg she holds is as jarring as the text below, which reads "Black Woman with Chicken," words which, on their own, have a strongly derogatory connotation. This is the wrong label, we think, or the wrong picture. Or is it the right label, that is, the conventional label, and didn't we, who labeled her, get it wrong?

Some works in *Ain't Jokin* play with the conventions of educational books and toys, using the favored teaching device of compare and contrast (*What's a cross between an ape and a nigger?*), and force the viewer to come close, to get involved. The answer is concealed by a sliding panel which the viewer must move to reveal the text (fig. 5). The viewer must touch—violating art-world conventions. The discomfort of touching the artwork is made to parallel the discomfort of confronting our own racism.

Although Weems pairs photos and captions throughout *Ain't Jokin*, she uses no formula. She plays words off images to varying purpose, evoking different responses. Some texts are literal descriptions (*Black Woman with Chicken*), unsettling because of their association with racist stereotyping; some reflect internalized racism within the black community (*Mirror, Mirror*), plate 11; others are unabashedly violent, racist jokes (*How do you get a nigger out of a tree?*). One might say there is something here to offend everyone—everyone, that is, but the unregenerate racist. This work has a demonstrated capacity to upset both black and liberal white audiences. That discomfort is surely one measure of its importance.

The use of racist humor in *Ain't Jokin* sets the series apart from a tradition of socially critical artwork that inverts the authority of commercial imagery. Nonetheless, Weems's work shares tactics with works by Victor Burgin, such as *Reflect/Contradiction* (published as a page of advertising in the January 1976 issue of *Artforum*), or *Possession* (five hundred posters hung throughout the streets of

**"Mirror, mirror on the wall, who's the finest of them all? . . . Snow White, you black bitch, and don't you forget it!!!"**

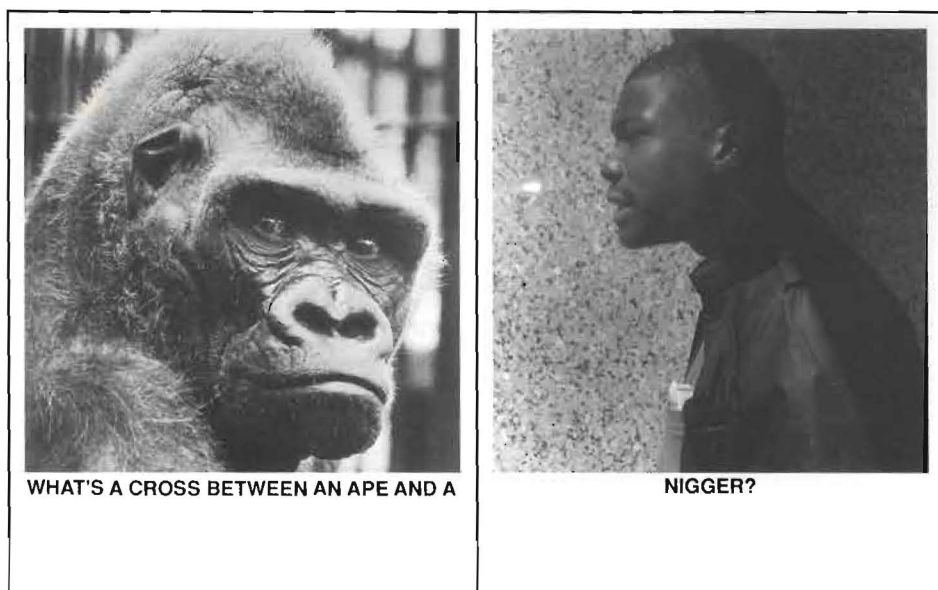


Fig. 5

*Ain't Jokin*

*What's a cross between  
an ape and a nigger?*, 1987-88

Diptych, two silver prints  
20 x 16 in. each

Answer: *A mentally retarded ape.*

Newcastle upon Tyne in the summer of 1976). It also uses an approach similar to Hans Haacke's *The Right to Life*, 1979 (adapted from a Breck advertisement), and Adrian Piper's *Vanilla Nightmares* series of 1986, in which Piper reworked newspaper advertisements, inserting repressed images of blacks. For a treatment of racial subject matter with a raucous, bawdy, similarly disquieting approach, we must turn to the work of Robert Colescott. The painted inversions of stock cultural images produced by Colescott (such as *George Washington Carver Crossing the Delaware*, 1975, in which Colescott substitutes Carver for his white namesake in the original painting by Emanuel Leutze), form a background to Weems's photographic explorations.<sup>9</sup>

*"Each of us carries around little packages of consumer racism in the form of neat little characteristics and qualities reserved for specific groups—unlike ourselves—we may encounter along this miserably short course in life. And the unfortunate part of the business is these stereotypes are not harmless expressions, but have real—devastatingly real—effects on the material well-being of those singled out as objects of these expressions."*<sup>10</sup>

The *American Icons* series of 1988-89 (plates 14-16) is a counterpart to *Ain't Jokin* because of its treatment of racist

imagery in our daily lives, as opposed to the mass media. Behind this series one hears the feminist slogan of the 1960s: "The personal is political." The formats of the series are the still life and the domestic interior. These photographs, lushly lit, composed and beautiful, slyly project their subtext as they reveal caricatured blacks reduced to subservient, decorative objects. The photographs show *tsatskes* or curios in the form of cookie-jars, ashtrays and other minor household furnishings. They hold letters on the desk, peek from behind a porch thermometer, serve as objects of fun in the playroom ("everywhere but in the bedroom," the artist has remarked, where racist myths about black sexuality might upset the hierarchy).

*"She felt like she was walking through a storm, like she was in a lonesome graveyard, like she had many rivers to cross, like making a way out of no way was her fate in life, like nobody knew the trouble she'd seen, like a change gotta come..."*<sup>11</sup>

In *Untitled* (Kitchen Table Series) of 1990 (plates 24-37) Carrie Mae Weems has created her masterpiece to date. The photographs have a beauty that exploits the full potential of the large-format camera. Their formal subtlety and intricacy counterpoints the folksiness of the text. Their verbal and visual call-and-response draws on African American tradition as it engages us in complex and timely issues. This inter-play develops the story in which a woman sorts out the conflicts between her political ideals and her emotional needs.

The narrative proceeds through a space that 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. The consistent illumination infusing the series recalls the bare bulbs of interrogation rooms, yet here the illumination becomes a metaphor for the artist's examination of the woman's life. The heroine interacts with her lover, daughter and friends. The characters sit and stand around a table—anchored to its central, domestic space. The strips of



**"She felt like she was walking through a storm, like she was in a lonesome graveyard, like she had many rivers to cross, like making a way out of no way was her fate in life, like nobody knew the trouble she'd seen, like a change gotta come,..."**

wood of the tabletop emphasize its planar recession and underline the objects placed upon it. These personal objects have the studied casualness of a 17th-century Dutch still life—the cigarettes, ashtrays, drinking glasses, playing cards become attributes of modern emotional life. The text for *Untitled* reveals a finely cocked ear for the vernacular. It combines a free-flowing association of folk sayings and lines from oft-heard songs, as familiar as the furnishings of one's home, to create a parable of contemporary life.

The format of *Untitled* is related to a tradition of narrative photographic fictions and to the use of serial photography by conceptual artists. It is also clearly related to film, as if we were given a script and storyboards. Yet the intricate choreography of the figures, down to the subtlest detail of a glance or gesture, would be impossible on film—it would be more likely in dance or in history painting from an earlier period. The work is, in part, a conscious response to feminist film criticism, particularly Laura Mulvey's analysis of the problems inherent in female representation.<sup>12</sup> The photographer is the model for the main protagonist of *Untitled*. This knowledge allows the viewer, in identifying with the photographer, to identify with her subject as well. The text always brings the viewer back to the narrative. Written in the third person, it is firmly anchored in the female voice, even when it opens up to allow her lover his say.

Weems has discussed the fact that Mulvey's analysis of female representation in film entirely elides the issue of women of color.<sup>13</sup> With her *Untitled* series, Weems challenges this omission, and looks back. Her protagonist not only functions independently of the white women who are her friends (upsetting the usual role assigned black women in white films), but several times within the sequence she stares directly at the viewer. Weems takes control of her own space, refusing to be the compliant object of "the gaze."

*"... I say now, if the white folks fight for thyself, and the black folk fight for thyself, we gonna crumble apart... There's white that suffer, there's Indian people that suffer, there's Mexican American people that*

*suffer, there's Chinese people that suffer, and I'm perfectly willing to make this country what it have to be. We gonna have to fight these battles TOGETHER..."*

*Fannie Lou Hamer*<sup>14</sup>

In 1990 Weems produced her first color work, when she was invited by Polaroid Corporation to use their 20 x 24 camera. One of three such experimental cameras, it produces large, unique images of highly saturated color. At the time Weems was accustomed to black and white photography's abstraction of chromatic range, and equally concerned with the abstract nature of racial categories. The subject of her Polaroid series is the universal one of social equity. Perhaps it should not surprise us that the images she produced with the Polaroid camera, using a series of filters, were monochrome—a warm sepia, more or less the color of her own skin (plates 38-43).

The Polaroid images became part of an installation titled *And 22 Million Very Tired and Very Angry People*. The installation consisted of thirteen still lifes, each of a single subject, plus single images of an armed man and a veiled woman. All fifteen photographs were captioned and arranged around the periphery of the space. Above the photographs Weems hung banners of text, evoking the voices of writers and theorists she admires: Fannie Lou Hamer, Antonio Gramsci, Ntozake Shange, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Anton Chekhov, Malcolm X and others. The photographs with suspended texts take the form of a primer, instructing the viewer about the role of the individual in the cause of political change.

*And 22 Million ...* is a call to social action by an artist grounded in theory who wants to go beyond abstract ideals. Weems has referred to the installation as her "kitchen piece," an attempt to get certain issues on the table. The objects in her still lifes have a particularly homey feel: a rolling pin (captioned *By Any Means Necessary*), a bedside alarm clock (*A Precise Moment in Time*), a manual typewriter, hardly the latest model (*An Informational System*). The installation addresses social and political awareness, but offers no single or clear reading. Are

the captioned objects to be seen as ironic references to obsolete tools, at least in the First World (a fan titled *A Hot Day*, the wooden mallet titled *A Hammer*, paired with *And A Sickle*)? Are they instead instruments of homemade revolution and low-tech progress? The only banner in Weems's own words reads, "At that moment we all knew that Cooke had been seriously on the money when he said 'a change is gonna come' and that Foucault was dead wrong. If this ain't a unique historical moment, what is it !!!" Despite the attraction to political analysis revealed by the statement, its irony betrays a strong impatience with rhetoric.

*"Deep Black, Ashy Black, Pale Black, Jet Black, Pitch Black, Dead Black, Blue Black, Purple Black, Chocolate-Brown, Coffee, Sealskin-Brown, Deep Brown, Honey Brown, Red Brown, Deep Yella*



Fig. 6  
*Colored People* (1989-90)  
Installation view, 1991  
Wadsworth Atheneum  
Hartford, Connecticut

*Brown, Chocolate, High-Brown, Low-Brown, Velvet Brown, Bronze, Gingerbread, Light Brown, Tan, Olive, Copper, Pink, Banana, Cream, Orange, High Yella, Lemon, Oh, and Yeah Caramel."*<sup>15</sup>

From late 1989 to early 1990 Weems created a series which celebrated the range of skin color hidden behind the term "black." Its title, *Colored People*, recaptures the term American whites once used to describe blacks, and plays upon the fact that the prints themselves are "colored" (hand-dyed black and white prints). The triptychs and single images in the series portray the terms by which the African American community has created its own hierarchies of color. The preference for lighter or darker skin has reflected the changing politics of the community and, while such distinction by color is controversial, it is still operative.

The format of the series harks back to the 19th-century use of photography in eugenics and criminology (by Francis Galton and Alphonse Bertillon), which led to the modern "mug shot."<sup>16</sup> Yet in both photographs and captions, Weems converts demeaning systems of picturing and naming into a loving embrace of our polychrome humanity. With deft irony, she takes the names of the colors of caste literally, highlighting their artificiality: her *Magenta Colored Girl* is the synthetic color of aniline dye, far from anyone's skin tone. She adapts the mug shot's sequence of front and side view, the better to trap the miscreant (or, in its use in anthropology, to fix the "primitive other"), and turns it into a repetition of affirmation. The series' reference to Minimalist art adds another layer of subtlety: Weems overlays Minimalism's formal repetitions with those of the mug shot. This gives Minimalism's color sequences a purpose, generated not by aesthetic considerations but by the social implications of color.

It is no accident that most of Weems's *Colored People* are, in fact, children and adolescents. *Golden Yella Girl* is a profile of a young girl with a broad gentle smile that reveals braces on her teeth. *Honey Colored Boy* is a bust portrait of a smooth-cheeked boy with an incipient mustache, his hair tied up in rubber bands. *Blue*



**"Deep Black, Ashy Black, Pale Black, Jet Black, Pitch Black, Dead Black, Blue Black, Purple Black, Chocolate-Brown, Coffee, Sealskin-Brown, Deep Brown, Honey Brown, Red Brown, Deep Yella Brown, Chocolate, High-Brown, Low-Brown, Velvet Brown, Bronze, Gingerbread, Light Brown, Tan, Olive, Copper, Pink, Banana, Cream, Orange, High Yalla, Lemon, Oh, and Yeah Caramel."**

*Black Boy* is younger still, staring directly at us, startling, darkly innocent. *Colored People*, growing out of black folklore, is addressed largely to its own young people—holding up a mirror to the beauty of their multiplicity (plates 17–23).

Carrie Mae Weems has forced a rereading of the history of photography in America, by insisting that we see black photographers as a distinct group with its own traditions. She has framed images of black Americans perpetuated through popular and media sources, and compelled us to examine their biases. She has furthermore adapted the repressive photographic techniques of Galton, as well as the documentary photography of both liberal social reformers and self-conscious art photographers. In so doing, Weems has brought a rare complexity, humor and beauty to an art dedicated to social change.

### Notes

1. Quote from the artist, in a symposium on photography held at the Whitney Museum of American Art, November 17, 1991.
2. The history of black women in photography has been primarily associated, until quite recently, with commercial work. Access to this history has been greatly improved with the publication of important research by Deborah Willis-Thomas in *An Illustrated Bio-Bibliography of Black Photographers, 1840-1940* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1985) and *An Illustrated Bio-Bibliography of Black Photographers, 1940-1988* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1989). See also Valencia Hollins Coar, *A Century of Black Photographers: 1840-1960* (Providence: Museum of Art, Rhode Island School of Design, 1983); and Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe, *Viewfinders: Black Women Photographers* (New York: Dodd Mead, 1986).
3. 1973 edition, published in 1972.
4. Interview with Lois Tarlow, published as "Profile: Carrie Mae Weems," *Art New England* (August/September, 1991): 10–12.
5. The artist discussing *Family Pictures and Stories* in a talk at the Whitney Museum of American Art, November 19, 1991.
6. Daniel Patrick Moynihan, *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action* (Washington: U.S. Department of Labor, Office of Policy Planning and Research, 1965).

7. Caption for *Mirror, Mirror* from the *Ain't Jokin* series.

8. Alan Dundes and Carl R. Pagter, *Urban Folklore from the Paperwork Empire* (Austin, Tex.: American Folklore Society, 1975).

9. For illustrations of the works cited above, see Victor Burgin, *Between* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd.; London: Institute of Contemporary Arts, 1986), 12, 15 and 17; Hans Haacke, *Unfinished Business* (New York: The New Museum of Contemporary Art; Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1986), 201; Adrian Piper, *Reflections 1967-1987* (New York: Alternative Museum, 1987), 34; and Robert Colescott, *A Retrospective, 1975-1986* (San Jose, Calif.: San Jose Museum of Art, 1987), 11.

10. From a statement by the artist printed in *Edict and Episode: Meaning and Image*, exhibition brochure (San Diego, Calif.: Alternative Space Gallery, 1987). Reprinted in *Prisoners of Image: Ethnic and Gender Stereotypes*, exhibition catalogue (New York: Alternative Museum, 1989) and in *Carrie Mae Weems/MATREX 115*, exhibition brochure (Hartford, Conn.: Wadsworth Atheneum, 1991).

11. Text excerpted from *Untitled* (Kitchen Table Series), 1990.

12. See particularly Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and the Narrative Cinema," *Screen* 16, no. 3 (Autumn 1975): 6–18. Reprinted in *Art after Modernism: Rethinking Representation*, ed. Brian Wallis (New York: The New Museum of Contemporary Art; Boston: David R. Godine, 1984) and in Laura Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989).

13. This was the primary focus of a Weems lecture at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago on April 20, 1992.

14. One of the banner quotes from *And 22 Million Very Tired and Very Angry People*.

15. From the artist's book by Weems, *THEN WHAT? Photographs and Folklore* (Buffalo, N.Y.: CEPA Gallery, 1990).

16. See Allan Sekula, "The Body and the Archive," *October* 39 (Winter 1986): 343–89. Revised and reprinted in *The Contest of Meaning: Critical Histories of Photography*, ed. Richard Bolton (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1989). See also John Tagg, "Power and Photography—Part I, A Means of Surveillance: The Photograph as Evidence in Law," *Screen Education* 36 (Autumn 1980): 45. Reprinted as Chapter 3 in John Tagg, *The Burden of Representation: Essays on Photographies and Histories* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988).

The monkey and the lion  
got to talking one day.  
Monkey looked down and said, Lion,  
I hear you's king in every way.  
But I know somebody who do  
not think that is true—  
He told me he could whip  
the living daylights out of you.

Lion said, Who?  
Monkey said, Lion, he talked about  
your mama  
and talked about your grandma, too,  
and I'm too polite to tell you  
what he said about you . . . .

The Signifying Monkey  
African American folklore



## Signifying

### Photographs and Texts in the Work of Carrie Mae Weems

Susan Fisher Sterling

"Contradictions reveal, among other things, the passing of time."<sup>1</sup> The old adage "one must change with the times" is apt, but change does not always come fast enough, and what kind of change should it be anyway? We tend to carry old assumptions into new situations, where they no longer make sense, and yet we do not see their inappropriateness. We would rather suffer irrationality than disturb the unity of well-known patterns. We bury, for a time or for a lifetime, contradictions that might lead to revisions or reconstruction. Yet, ultimately such inconsistencies have the potential to resurface, piercing through our complacency like small daggers.

Carrie Mae Weems's photographs and texts have the poignant power to summarize contradiction and signal the capacity for change. Using artistic strategies that address the fragmented experience of contemporary "reality," she creates art that cuts through the veneer of accepted social truths to reveal our deep cultural heritage of prejudice and oppression.

In revealing these strong disjunctions, however, her images and words also form a site for response and reconstitution. Often developing a spiraling dynamic, her work moves from the personal to the social to the political and back again, both within each series and as a whole. These levels of complexity engage us as viewers, establishing a locus for the exchange of

feelings and ideas about issues of race, class, gender and identity.

Weems's primary concern in art, as in politics, is the status and place of African Americans in the United States.<sup>2</sup> As Audre Lorde has pointed out, traditionally in American society it is the oppressed groups who are expected to "stretch out and bridge the gap," thus teaching the oppressors their mistakes.<sup>3</sup> This is Carrie Mae Weems's ambitious intention: to produce art that addresses formal and political issues encircling African American culture, in the hope of creating new patterns for relating as equals across our human differences. Adopting a tone and manner very much like that of her intellectual forebear Zora Neale Hurston's in "How It Feels to Be Colored Me," the artist has stated, "I'm feeling extremely colored now days, and I'm happy about my 'conditions.' For much too long, I've placed great emphasis on being European and Western. Often at the expense of overlooking the value of Afro-American culture, I've used European aesthetics and standards as a starting point for creating my own work. So this notion of 'feeling colored' has to do with drawing upon Afro-American culture as a foundation for creating art."<sup>4</sup> Well grounded in the documentary mode of photography and its discursive spaces, and well schooled in French theory and its deconstructive problematizing, she uses these languages as

tools in getting down to her primary objectives.

Weems's work is meant to challenge the traditional discourses of documentary photography. Rejecting the "objectivity" of photographers such as Garry Winogrand, Tod Papageorge and Bruce Davidson, she asks us to question their motives, especially their aggressive condescension as ethnological outsiders documenting "the lives and habits of others." In contrast, Carrie Weems has adopted strategies which examine and subvert the relationship between conventional photographic representation and racist and sexist ideologies.<sup>5</sup> Her work complements that of other contemporary photographers, such as Lorna Simpson, Connie Hatch, Cindy Sherman, David Wojnarowicz, Barbara Kruger and Allan Sekula, who extend and supplement our understanding of Western culture, its motivations and practices.

Weems uses her artistic practices as a path toward enfranchisement and empowerment. She is more interested in resolution than in endless analysis. Raised in the Civil Rights era; schooled in the first wave of the Black Consciousness movement; anchored in the Marxist left; baptized in the photography of the Kamoinge Workshop;<sup>6</sup> immersed in the aesthetics of the Harlem Renaissance and the writings of Zora Neale Hurston and Toni Morrison; and socialized through her studies of African American folklore, Carrie Weems's words and images are not "the elements of style." They are, as Kellie Jones has stated, cultural signifiers, full of the ability to speak directly to deep issues.<sup>7</sup> Among the penetrating questions her art asks is: "If it were possible to move beyond the stereotypes of black/woman, how would a person recreate herself as co-equal." In answering such questions Weems works within specific genres to activate the discourse between viewer and artist. To achieve this dialogue she uses experience, in its broadest sense, as a guidepost for her work. She thrives on individual and collective memories, histories and fictions. From her background in folklore, she understands the value of questioning or reconstituting the shared wisdom of one or more cultures. Creating photographic, oral and written responses to long tradi-

tions of storytelling, speechifying and signifying, she is heavily invested in the understood, the shared, the familiar. Her intertextual strategies, using photographs and text, bring "black" and "white" images together on the page, in her art and in our minds. It is through these interconnections that we come to understand her artistic and cultural motivations best. The following essay will examine the interconnections of her imagery through four major series created by the artist from 1978 through 1991.

### Of Family and Lore

In both folklore and numerology, three is one of the most potent numbers.<sup>8</sup> In *Family Pictures and Stories* Weems tells us tales in threes to create her family chronicle. Interweaving photographs, captions and audiotapes, she records for posterity the Polk family's migration north in the 1950s, the characteristics and experiences of the Weemses and the particulars of her own family's dynamic. Begun, as Andrea Kirsh has noted, as a rebuttal to assumptions found in the 1965 Moynihan Report, *Family Pictures and Stories* developed into a tale of self-recollection that integrally relates her family's experience to that of many other African American families in this country.<sup>9</sup> Here, Carrie Mae Weems treats her own experience and that of her family as culture/folklore, rather than as a social condition.<sup>10</sup> For the first time, she defines herself primarily as a person within a specific culture rather than through her relationship to white society—depicting the interior life of her family, affirming its relationships and remembrances, acknowledging its conflicts and contradictions.

Weems began working on *Family Pictures and Stories* in 1978, while attending CalArts. She first exhibited the work in 1984 as part of her M.F.A. thesis for the University of California, San Diego, just before entering the master's program in folklore at University of California, Berkeley.<sup>11</sup> In the audiotape she explains that in 1979, in "a desperate search," she went south with her sister to visit her father's family in Memphis and her mother's people in the small delta town of Clarksdale, Mississippi. This trip "home"

became the catalyst for *Family Pictures and Stories*.

From this point on, like Hurston before her, Weems took up the role of participant/observer in creating her family's folklore.<sup>12</sup> Although she had not considered herself as an active family member for some time, she felt compelled to provide "her take on her people." As photographer, writer and storyteller, Weems exercised full editorial control over the series. Not surprisingly, she chose to emphasize "the woman's voice"—her own as the narrator and that of her mother and cousin as sources of family biography and hearsay. In doing so, she established an important cultural link between the work, the oral traditions of African American storytelling and the fiction of Hurston and

Morrison, which is strongly invested with this rich cultural language. Once we hear the artist's silky, expressive voice on the audiotape paying homage to both histories and dreamtime, we sense these connections immediately.

In *Family Pictures and Stories*, Carrie Mae Weems also developed a montage of photos and texts that embody an approach to imaging African Americans by and for themselves. Taking Roy DeCarava as her model, Weems reframes the open vitality of his work within her own 35mm photographs. Her family portraits have the look of informality; yet, for all their casualness, they are carefully constructed images that define her family members in essential ways. There is a sense of immediate connection between the photographer and her subject: very little space, either physical or emotional, comes between them. This economy of form will become a hallmark of her style.

As the artist herself has maintained, there is much in the formal makeup of this series that pays tribute to DeCarava and Langston Hughes's photoessay *The Sweet Flypaper of Life* (1955). The number of soft-focus and close-up images; the attention to private, family spaces, like a bedroom or kitchen; the inclusion of illuminated rooms at night; even the warm-toned paper and diptych page formats demonstrate her strong, conscious involvement in extending DeCarava's art.<sup>13</sup> Certain photographs actually seem to quote the master lovingly.<sup>14</sup> Moving beyond emulation, Weems layers the photographic text of her own family's story onto DeCarava's depiction of the living, working people of 1950s Harlem.<sup>15</sup> Like him, she is no ethnological interloper but rather someone who has been welcomed with a hug and a smile.

Weems's texts in *Family Pictures and Stories* seek to further ground the meaning of the photographs. Unpretentious and accessible, her language assumes the colloquialisms and tone of spoken black English. Unlike the notes found in other family albums, which talk about happy babies and loving couples but skip the problems of missed opportunities and tough choices, Weems searches for captions that express the drama in the lives of



Fig. 7  
*Family Pictures and Stories*  
*Mom and Willy*, 1981-82  
 Silver print, 8½ x 13 in.



her working-class family.<sup>16</sup> Often she picks up on an idea, decision or event that helped form or alter someone's self-image and family standing. Inviting participation, her texts intensely involve you with people you have just met, leaving impressions that are hard to shake. They express years of private, family material, compressed into the space of a few lines of type.

Beginning with her own characterization in "Welcome home" (plate 1), she tells of her nervousness at being reunited with her family: "I went back home this summer. Hadn't seen my folks for awhile, but I'd been thinking about them, felt a need to say something about them, about us, about me and to record something about our family, our history. I was scared. Of What? I don't know, but on my first night back, I was welcomed with so much love from Van and Vera, that I thought to myself, 'Girl, this is your family. Go on and get down.'" Although the photograph and text were created at different times, within the artistic reality of *Family Pictures and Stories*, the addition of a caption to the photo of two beaming young women convinces us that Weems has just arrived at home and her sisters are there to welcome her back into the center of the family.<sup>17</sup>

Most of the captions provide pithy descriptions of their sitters. Some confirm the impressions conveyed in the photographs, such as *Dad with Suzie-Qs* or *Van and Vera with kids in the kitchen* (plates 7 and 8). Others strongly contradict that sense, including *Dad and Son-Son* and *Alice on the bed* (plates 3 and 4). A photograph of a swaddled girl-woman lying quietly on a bed, *Alice* is a wonderful image of vulnerability. The text, however, casts her as the bedrock of the family: "Alice is the oldest and as the oldest—when momma wasn't home—cooked our food, washed our clothes and us, cleaned the house, when necessary even whipped our behinds. She's a no jive kinda woman, taking no slack from nobody for no reason. And the thing I like about her is her profound commitment to family. Girl will do whatever to hold it together. Tough cookie." This kind of artful storytelling recasts the photo, extending its meaning beyond the moment of its creation.

The final layer of audiotaped interviews and recollections adds an important social dimension to Weems's photographs and texts. Almost as if she had added Richard Wright's commentary in *12 Million Black Voices: A Folk History of the Negro in the United States* on top of *The Sweet Flypaper of Life*, our understanding of the Weems family is broadened by the larger social and historical context developed in the audiotape. An introduction by the artist provides the reason for this oral history: "No doubt there is something grand in the knowing and in the creating of ourselves, but something more grand in how we know and create those personal histories. For hundreds of years people have used the oral tradition for this purpose . . . breathing life back into days gone, times remembered and stories told."<sup>18</sup> The audiotape, which then goes on to proudly record the family tree, also tells of the evils of sharecropping; the real, physical dangers associated with being a smart, southern black; the problems of miscegenation and passing; and the difficulty of being only a handful of generations away from slavery.<sup>19</sup> The audiotape insists that, good and bad, we are the creators and the recipients of our own family history.

By the time the viewer completes the experience of *Family Pictures and Stories*, a great deal has been learned about a certain working-class family in Portland, Oregon, which encompasses larger issues of race, identity and class distinctions. Through a complex montaging of parallel narratives—photographs, writing and oral texts—Carrie Weems asserts the realities of African American self-respect, strength, humor, resourcefulness and home ties, while also confronting the problems of male aggression, teenage pregnancy, joblessness and other forms of working-class oppression. She tells us "these are my folks and they matter." The denotative character of photographic reality has been made connotative many times over, and the family's experience assumes the mantle of lore.

### Of Stereotype and Prejudice

In the three years that passed between *Family Pictures and Stories* and the com-



pletion of the *Ain't Jokin* series in 1988, folklore became integral to Weems's involvement with photography. Describing her time at Berkeley as a period of wondrous fascination, the artist notes that folklore provided a way for her to bridge her upbringing with Marxist philosophy and social action in a way she had not been able to do since the 1970s.<sup>20</sup> Folklore's analysis of diverse social groups and their belief systems, as well as its emphasis on "bearers of lore," audiences and observers, also intersected positively with Weems's earlier training in semiology and deconstructive theories. As she describes it, her deepening involvement in African American folk material gave her a foundation from which to work effectively. The challenge became one of locating the conjunctions between her photographic image-making and the larger African American folk tradition, recasting both in her own voice.

Having gained a new knowledge base, Weems began collecting both African American and Anglo-American lore—everything from songs, stories and folk sayings to racist jokes and memorabilia. The early results of this research led her to the *Ain't Jokin* series of 1987–88. A major part of Weems's enterprise in *Ain't Jokin* involves breaking down black and white "fictions of coherence," those myths of race, class and gender that become "truth" through repetition. Using the resources of folklore and photography, she powerfully attacks racist stereotypes as perpetuated in Anglo-American folk culture and exposes the joke's power to limit opportunity. In the same way that Jenny Holzer addresses the charade of social mores, Hans Haacke deals with the structures of corporate power or Barbara Kruger critiques identity construction via advertising, Weems sets out to make us understand that racial prejudice occupies some of the deepest structures within the American psyche.

The mental and material domination of Africans and African Americans via stereotypes is as old as four centuries of associating blacks with apes or two centuries of sassy southern mammies and grinning sambos (plates 14–16).<sup>21</sup> Berkeley folklorist Alan Dundes in *Interpreting*

*Folklore*, as well as social psychologists Sander Gilman in *Difference and Pathology* and Arthur G. Miller in *Contemporary Issues in Stereotyping*, all have discussed the nature, history and effect of social stereotypes.<sup>22</sup> Although they agree that stereotypes are not negative by nature, stereotypes are seen as exaggerating differences between groups for "contrast effect." This kind of contrast and limit-setting turns ugly when the ethno- and egocentrism of one group, especially the dominant culture, combines with the psychodynamic factors of projection and scapegoating to oppress another.<sup>23</sup> As Dundes has phrased it, "projection provides protection," and the group which is perceived as threat or taboo is imprisoned within the folkloric fantasy of the stereotype.<sup>24</sup> Once the stereotype of the "other" is fixed, it becomes the object of jokes, carrying the dominant culture's anxieties on its back. Again according to Dundes, because jokes as stereotypes are a socially sanctioned way to talk about anything that's not socially sanctioned, they become more prevalent and virulent after important events and during times of historic change.<sup>25</sup>

Weems's *Ain't Jokin* series confronts racist humor as a process of projection and scapegoating—a mirror held up to reveal Anglo-American oppression. Using her own lifetime as a starting point, she concentrated on jokes from the Civil Rights era. In the 1950s and 1960s, when blatantly expressed racism became less acceptable, the ethnic jokes that reemerged became an important indicator of real social integration, or the lack thereof.<sup>26</sup> By juxtaposing these texts with photographs, Weems dramatically transforms the jokes into a positive attack on negative humor. She uses them to question our integrity in continuing to create and be amused by such racist stereotypes.

The moral premise of the series is found in its title. "Ain't jokin" is a double entendre which not only points to jokes as expressions of people's true feelings but also asks the question, "Can you believe this? No really. I really heard someone say it. I'm not joking." Like Adrian Piper's business card "I am black," which she hands out at social occasions

when someone makes a racist remark,<sup>27</sup> or Lorna Simpson's turning her back to or masking her face from the viewer, Weems's work powerfully underscores the devastating, dehumanizing consequences stereotypes impose upon individuals and ethnic groups.

As if to signal her new intentions in *Ain't Jokin*, Weems created the entire series using a large format camera, rather than a 35mm, and employing new photo-text strategies. While she continued to rely occasionally on "informal" photographs for works such as *White Patty* (plate 10), for others, such as *Black Woman with Chicken* and *Mirror, Mirror*, she experimented with photographs created in the studio (plates 9 and 11). In addition, for works such as *What did Lincoln say after a drinking bout?* and *A Child's Verse*, she appropriated images from newspapers, magazines and school textbooks (plate 13).<sup>28</sup> Using a standard format of a square photograph with typeset text below, each work is a seamless montage on a single sheet of photographic paper.

When the various jokes, in the form of associations, rhymes and riddles, are connected to the photographs, our reactions to them range from quizzical to wide-eyed disbelief. In the case of associative works, such as *Black Woman with Chicken* or *Black Man with Watermelon*, the image and text work in subtle opposition to one another (plate 9). We see a black woman and we see a leg of chicken or a black man and a watermelon, but the people and the objects have no real connection. The association is ironic, deadpan. While the titles tap directly into the white stereotype that all black people love chicken and watermelon, Weems's photographic depictions immediately subvert the stereotypes, making us aware of our own presumptuousness. We are a bit lost. It is a mild slap on the wrist.

In the case of rhymes, the photograph generally functions as an illustration. The stories are more violent than the associations, most often describing injustices inflicted upon African Americans. In *A Child's Verse* (plate 13), for example, Weems uses a news photo of laughing white men, one of whom holds a stick as if he were hitting a baseball. For anyone

who has seen photographs of Civil Rights-era violence, however, the implication is that these men are not baseball fans; they are racist southerners, one of whom is acting out the beating of a black man or woman. This assumption is corroborated by the rhyme Weems has chosen:

*In 1944 my father went to war  
Pulled a trigger  
Shot a nigger  
That was the end of the war.*

Although no guns or uniforms appear in the photo, we make a leap of faith over these inconsistencies and identify the image with the violent inhumanity of segregation and racism: in the American military during World War II; the South of the 1950s and 1960s; the American army in Vietnam; or New York, Los Angeles and Miami today.<sup>29</sup> The artist counts on our shared knowledge of such abuses of power to bring home the full impact of *A Child's Verse*.

The third type, the riddles, are the most confrontational jokes of all. In part, they are upsetting because of the role we are asked to play as viewers. We are disquieted by the process of the racist "Q & A," especially when we are asked to open a sliding panel to discover the riddle's answer: "What did Lincoln say after a drinking bout?" Answer: "I freed the what?" We are more profoundly disturbed, however, by our own stifled laughter. Like Polish jokes, elephant jokes and dead baby jokes, we know the form of the riddle or have heard it told before. Our prejudice is quickly revealed through *Ain't Jokin's* art.

"What are the three things you can't give a black person?" Answer: "A black eye, a fat lip and a job." The riddle oppressively inflects a beautiful study of man looking out from his front porch. Although more subtle than some of the others, this photo/text poignantly confronts stereotypes about African American physical features and abilities.<sup>30</sup> The joke's punch line not only ridicules negroid features as severe distortions of the white ideal but also condones physical violence—beatings are sanctioned because the evidence will not show. The final blow about "a job" completes the indigni-



ty. The joke invites the viewer to assume that this man is sitting on his porch because he is unemployed, eliciting stereotypes of laziness. The juxtaposition of a noble bearing with a racist riddle makes abundantly clear the pain involved in learning that, under the colonizing gaze, no one has control over his own image.

When the *Ain't Jokin* series is considered as a whole, two interrelated types of racist humor are recognizable: 1) jokes which perpetuate inferior images of blacks as compared to whites with regard to intelligence, physiognomy, manners and abilities; and 2), jokes which attack civil rights advances by defending white violence and white supremacy. Presentation, in this case, is its own

deconstruction and demystification. The works reveal the perpetuation of prejudice and the lack of real social acceptance for African Americans. *Ain't Jokin* puts the lie to what Michele Wallace has called "one of the principal tenets of bourgeois humanism, that color is an innately trivial matter, which does not signify."<sup>31</sup> If these photo-texts anger, disgust and outrage us, Weems presents each viewer with a telling choice: "Displace your distress onto the artist who is legitimately using visual and verbal images current in our own culture or confront the pathology of a society that continues to perpetuate racism."<sup>32</sup>

### Of Women and Relationships

When the psychological pain of *Ain't Jokin's* inhuman social barometer had worn her thin and angry, Carrie Mae Weems wisely decided to move on. She was on a month-long summer fellowship at the Smithsonian Institution in 1987, researching images of African Americans in photography and in other forms of Anglo-American cultural expression, when something inside her snapped. It was time to submerge the white point of view. She turned instead to a few favorite things: Zora Neale Hurston's writings; jazz and the blues; folk painting and drawing. She hoped to mine an essence from these cultural idioms that would help redirect her work. From this, she produced the installation, *Ode to Affirmative Action* (1989), "a tribute to the role of the stage in early expressions of African-American culture" (fig. 8),<sup>33</sup> and created a group of photographs that played off of African American beliefs and lore. She soon combined these and other, earlier documentary photographs with traditional sayings, proverbs and cures to create the artist's book, *THEN WHAT? Photographs and Folklore*, 1990.<sup>34</sup>

In *THEN WHAT?* two photographs stand out from the rest and are crucial to the beginning of the artist's next major photo-narrative. "Jim" is the prototype for the man, whose social mission is impossible (fig. 9), while the disconsolate woman in *Untitled* (Woman and phone) is Weems's protagonist (plate 28). The spare



Fig. 8  
*Ode to Affirmative Action*, 1989  
Silver print, record and label  
24 x 30 in.



Fig. 9  
*Jim, if you choose...*, 1990  
 Silver print, 14½ x 14½ in.

studio set-up for both works—a kitchen table and overhead lamp—serves as the stage set for all twenty photographs in the series. In the *Untitled* (Kitchen Table Series) of 1990, Weems beautifully articulates a new point of view, moving us beyond the colonizing gaze of the stereotype toward an understanding of and empathy for African Americans as “people first” (plates 24–37).<sup>35</sup> To do so, she returns to a favorite strategy and presents us with a fictional narrative acted out through a series of tableaux.

While the construction of stories is not something new to her work, in *Untitled* Weems spins ever more deeply into her concerns about the character of male/female relations in contemporary culture.<sup>36</sup> The intricacy and interweaving of the fictions in this series breaks away from the more obvious issues of “black/white” relations to confront the contradictions and struggle within “black on black” involvements. Markedly more ambitious than

anything she had attempted before, *Untitled* approaches the edges of cultural consciousness to confront deep-rooted fictions of self.

The *Untitled* series also is related to a variety of modern and contemporary approaches to photo-fiction, including photoessays of the 1940s and 1950s; Duane Michals's serial narratives of the 1970s; Allan Sekula's storied photo-documents; Conceptual works by artists such as John Baldessari, Eleanor Antin and Bill Beckley; as well as film and video.<sup>37</sup> Perhaps equally important to Weems's attitude is what Stephen Heath has characterized as the pervasive influence of fictional narratives in the day-to-day commerce of our culture: “stories, romances, novels, photo-novels, radio serials, films, television plays and series—fictions everywhere, all-pervasive, with consumption obligatory by virtue of this omnipresence . . . This mass production of fictions is the culture of what might be called the ‘novelistic’, the constant narration of the social relations of individuals, the ordering of meanings for the individual in society.”<sup>38</sup>

Weems's approach in the *Untitled* series is assuredly self-conscious. She banks on common knowledge and associations to create the tension and spin needed to keep her good yarn about love and the blues on track. She has experienced such things deeply, and uses the best rhetorical devices she can marshal to convey the feelings of longing and loss. Although the work is about the use of clichés, she weaves together her staged photographs and song-lyric texts so gracefully that we overlook the artifice. We lose ourselves for a time in the telling, as we stand at the end of the kitchen table looking in.

In *Untitled*, Weems invites us to construct a woman's story through her social relations to her man, their child and her friends, within a setting of domestic ordinariness. The photographs are presented in chapters, each of which contains several images. The first photo “chapter” speaks about the developing love relationship between the woman and the man (plates 24–27); the second presents the woman seeking consolation from friends and family (plates 29–30); the third describes the



woman's role as a mother (plates 31–33); and the fourth depicts the woman coping with being alone (plates 35–37).<sup>30</sup> Weems develops the story's rhythmic flow through groupings of two, three or more images.

The works themselves are exquisitely controlled tableaux vivants. The repetition of staging and lighting develops feelings of familiarity and intimacy. Since love is a domestic issue, what better place to act it out than in the kitchen, where everyone is "fed." Manipulating the social and psychological positioning of the people at her table, Weems coaxes impressive performances from the actors, including herself as the female protagonist. The exacting placement of a small range of domestic props and subtle costume changes, from black to white and back to black again, adds a certain stylishness to the dramaturgy.



Fig. 10  
*Untitled* (Kitchen Table Series), 1990  
 Installation view, 1990  
 P.P.O.W. Gallery, New York

The photo-triptychs, in particular, provide a wonderful extension to the story line. For instance, in *Untitled* (Man reading newspaper), plate 27, the dynamic between the woman and man is played out in three photographs, from the cool anger of separation to the sadness of an unreconciled embrace. Often the triptychs are bracketed by one or more images that add to their expressive meaning. *Untitled* (Eating lobster) and *Untitled* (Woman and phone) are such works. They elaborate on the woman's strong love for her man and the desolation she feels when he leaves her (plates 26 and 28).

The texts of the series also act like chapters, although they are looser and more fragmented, calling to mind the heroine's "running at the mouth, talking things through." Purposely dislocating any sense of filmic unity from the start, the written narrative often functions independently of the photographs; the imagery of text and photographs are not synchronized with one another. This disjunction creates a site for resistance and exchange, as the written story line works to extend, contradict, foreshadow or lag behind events depicted in the photographs. Although there are continual references between the photographs and texts, their narrative cycles run on parallel tracks, intersecting only at certain key moments. One of the best examples of this may be found in the man's story. In the photographic narrative, he is "out of the picture" before the cycle is a third complete, while in the text he remains on the scene until the final chapter. We intuit, from this point of disjunction, that their love is doomed. It is then up to the remaining images and writing to recount how the relationship falls apart and how the protagonist emerges with her selfhood intact. Only at the end, when the woman is alone in both photographs and text, do we know for sure that her lover is gone for good.

In general, the texts provide a broader, more complex set of interactions between the characters than the photographic narrative does. Here, the issues of money, fidelity, politics and self-worth enter into the mix. The texts tell us that the woman is making "long" money and

he is not (p. 84). We find out that she has been unfaithful and that a friend double-crosses her (p. 77). We witness as the daughter foreshadows the family's breakup through the games she plays and the words she says (p. 83). We are frightened when the woman and man's relationship comes to a violent, nearly fatal, end after she goads him into such a frenzy that he hangs her upside down from their seventh-story window (p. 86). "One day he placed a match-box on her clothes. It was time to book."

Told in the autobiographical third person, each of the main characters—woman, man and child—establishes her/his voice within the texts. Weems creates their stories using a combination of familiar phrases, song lyrics and children's rhymes and games:

*Looking her up, down, sideways he said, "So tell me baby, what do you know about this great big world of ours?" Smiling she said, "Not a damn thang sugar. I don't mind telling you my life's not been sheltered from the cold and I've not always seen the forest or smelled the coffee, played momma to more men than I care to remember. Consequently I've made several wrong turns, but with conviction I can tell you I'm nobody's fool. So a better question might be: what can you teach me?"*

*He wasn't sure, confessing he didn't have a handle on this thing called life either. But he was definitely in a mood for love. Together they were falling for that ole black magic. In that moment it seemed a match made in heaven. They walked, not hand in hand, but rather side by side in the twinkle of August/September sky, looking sidelong at one another, thanking their lucky stars with fingers crossed.*

With the exception of this one narrative, however, the characters rarely speak directly to one another. Although their texts relate a great deal about their likes and dislikes, desires and frustrations, there is very little intersection between them. They are anchored in their own perspectives, just as their thoughts are presented by Weems in the form of written clichés. Each one has her/his own story to tell, yet they talk across, over or through one

another. We begin to understand the importance Weems ascribes to "the distances between people in the same family, between men and women, and between ethnic groups and nationalities through the use of language derived from experience." Her characters' psychological realities are the scenes of disjunction as much as they are the sites of connection.

*Untitled* was a particularly empowering series for Carrie Weems, as author, actor and director. In it she plays upon the viewer's heartstrings, at times overwhelming us emotionally. We understand the characters and their "real life" dilemmas, identify with their early triumphs and empathize with their later conflicts and failures. We feel an especially strong bond and/or attraction to the protagonist Weems has created, particularly in the final set of photographs when the written texts have stopped and the woman is alone, again. We sense the potential for vulnerability. Yet, her direct, face to face confrontation across the table in *Untitled* (Woman standing alone), convinces us that she can make it on her own. In this one picture Weems, as photographer, woman and catcher of souls, stares out and into us. Through the eyes of the dynamic black female persona she has created, she lets us know that she will not, nor will her protagonist, be allowed to vanish or self-destruct under the withering effects of the male gaze or the lingering power of outdated patriarchal assumptions. Unlike such artists as Lorna Simpson or Cindy Sherman, who resist debasement of women via language or film by never revealing themselves fully to the camera, Weems leaps over this convention of Postmodernism to assert her photographic persona's integrity, tying it directly to her own as photographer and creator. Weems thereby enables her female character to gaze directly back at the viewer as an equal, taking full possession of her sexuality and sense of self in the process (plate 34).<sup>40</sup>

In pursuing the narratives in *Untitled*, we continually find ourselves tracing out the production of sexual difference through social positioning. The relations between photograph and text are consistently governed by the artist's desire to





Fig. 11  
*And 22 Million Very Tired and Very Angry People* (1991)  
 Installation view, 1991  
 The New Museum of Contemporary Art  
 New York (Courtesy New Museum of Contemporary Art)

recognize her characters' struggle, as the heroine, her man and child grapple with the flaws in their inherited social roles.<sup>41</sup> Although only Weems's protagonist may ultimately succeed, struggle becomes the symbol for each character's individuality and sense of purpose. Like Toni Morrison's stories *The Bluest Eye*, *Sula* and *Beloved*, whose heroines live, struggle and often die in an inverted and unjust relationship to society's "truths," Carrie Mae Weems's *Untitled* series provides a contemporary woman's fable of the highest order.

### Of Power and Revolution

*And 22 Million Very Tired and Very Angry People* also addresses the inherent, pervasive lack of fairness in American society, based on determinants of race, class and gender. Like *Untitled*, the work relies upon a series of individual voices for its meaning. This time, however, the voices join together with the artist's own in a chorus to advocate vigorously for deep social reform. At the center of Weems's concerns in *And 22 Million . . .* is the ongoing struggle for equality by African Americans. With this struggle as the work's focus, the installation goes on to provide "an insider's guide" to political

action. Stretching beyond the revelations of prejudice found in *Ain't Jokin*, the emblematic photographs, captions and banners in *And 22 Million . . .* work together to establish the importance of individual thought and action, as well as the possibility of collective social action based upon collaboration between individuals.<sup>42</sup> Symbolic in character and millenarian in tone, the work is meant to touch all kinds of people: black, brown, yellow, and white; women and men; young and old; native and immigrant; working class, middle class, underclass and more, spreading the message that their voices will matter if raised together in the spirit of protest and hope of reform.

Weems's title is meant to establish a strong socio-psychological link to Richard Wright and Edwin Rosskam's 1941 photoessay, *12 Million Black Voices: A Folk History of the Negro in the United States*. Wright's essay is inspirational in the way it transformed a commentary on the first northern migration of blacks in the 1920s into a spiritual hymn for equality. In particular, in the last chapter entitled "Men in the Making," Wright, as impassioned preacher, urges:

*The differences between black folk and white folk are not blood or color, and the ties that bind us are deeper than those that separate us. . . .*

*Look at us and know us and you will know yourselves, for we are you, looking back at you from the dark mirror of our lives!*

*What do we black folk want?*

*We want what others have, the right to share in the upward march of American life, the only life we remember or have ever known. . . .*

*We are with the new tide. We stand at the crossroads. We watch each new procession. The hot wires carry urgent appeals. Print compels us. Voices are speaking. Men are moving! And we shall be with them. . . .*<sup>43</sup>

In *And 22 Million Very Tired and Very Angry People*, Weems signals her solidarity with Wright's views on the critical importance of black America's social progress. Reiterating and extending Wright's ideas, Weems's work puts for-



ward the question: "Standing as we are, ten years before the end of the 20th century, three hundred years since the American institution of slavery, almost a century and a half since emancipation and half a century since African Americans began the move north in search of a better life, what is our position in America today? Where do we stand as a symbol of human progress and change?" Her all too obvious answer also lies in the title she has chosen: "We are now twenty-two million very tired, very angry people waiting for full enfranchisement." The implication here that African Americans cannot and will not wait much longer becomes the starting point for her installation's call to action for change.

*And 22 Million Very Tired and Very Angry People* may be seen as Carrie Mae Weems's attempt to reinvent and revitalize the leftist, humanist photoessay of the 1930s and 1940s in time for the 1990s. Consciously rejecting the empathetic documentary style of such Farm Security Administration (FSA) photographers as Russell Lee, Walker Evans and Dorothea Lange, whose work is found in all commentaries on Depression-era photographs, Weems approaches her subject emblematically, even allegorically. Her photographs of tools are iconic, the familiar phrases she uses for captions are heavily coded and the banner texts she chooses are quotations from classic texts.

Her strategies for combining these elements call upon us, as viewers, to think, act and participate in the production of meaning within the work. By working as individuals to piece together the photographic and written elements provided by the artist, and depending on how we choose to shift our attention from photo to caption to banner within the installation, we become responsible for creating a whole that is larger than the sum of its parts. Our participation in *And 22 Million Very Tired and Very Angry People* thereby functions as both a metaphor for and a path toward collective social action.

In taking up where earlier photoessays left off, *And 22 Million . . .* pays homage to the work of one former FSA documentarian, Walker Evans. In particular, Weems was intrigued by Evans's late photoessay

"Beauties of the Common Tool," a portfolio of photographs and text which appeared in *Fortune* magazine in 1955.<sup>44</sup> As Weems explained, she had puzzled over the meaning of Evans's odd, yet famous, tool photographs for some time before she discovered a way to use and extend their meaning for her purposes.

In the fifteen large-format Polaroid photographs for *And 22 Million . . .*, she, like Evans, presented various tools, one per page, displayed like specimens or artifacts of a culture.<sup>45</sup> In contrast to Evans's celebration of the beauty and functionalism of the modern hand tool, however, Weems's photographs assert the continued usefulness of older implements. Her tools are worn relics that carry a history of use and an air of mystery. Indeed, unlike Evans's flatly mounted specimens, Weems's tools appear to float, like ghosts within the half-light of the photograph's sepia tones. If Evans's goal was to celebrate the labor of the common man through his love of tools, Weems's object-portraits act as symbols of the labor of American slaves and their descendants, whose cause she champions by casting a new light upon the full, rich shadows of their experience.

It is interesting to think of Weems's tool photographs as emblematic in this way, particularly when they are seen in conjunction with the banner quotation from Malcolm X. Speaking about African American contributions to the building of America, he writes: "It was our labor that built this house. You sat beneath the old cotton tree telling us how long to work or how hard to work, but it was our labor, our sweat, and our blood that made this country what it is, and we're the only ones who haven't benefited from it. And all we're saying today is, it's payday—retroactive."<sup>46</sup> In the context of the installation, it is hard not to think of the hammer and sickle as symbols of the urban and rural working class, the rolling pin as the cook in the kitchen or the out-of-date typewriter as a poor writer of revolutionary broadsides. With the inclusion of the allegorical figures of *An Armed Man* and *A Veiled Woman* (plates 42 and 43), representing the tactics of overt and clandestine resistance,<sup>47</sup> it becomes clear that

each of Weems's portrait-like photographs serves an important symbolic function within the framework of social change proffered by the artist.

In captioning these photographs, Weems also seems to take the anthropological view that, as artifacts of culture, the function of tools can only be fully known if we understand the society which created them. To this end, her captions provide further keys to the meaning of each object. Whether metaphoric, as in *A Hot Spot in a Corrupt World* for a globe, or metonymic, as in *Some Theory* for a partly opened book (plates 38 and 40), the captions extend the scope of the work's symbology. *A Hot Spot in a Corrupt World* is a particularly rich example. Here, the term for a bright spot on the surface of a photograph combines with a geopolitical description of a troubled region to pinpoint the northwest coast of Africa, where the slave trade once flourished. The image and text thus work together in a most economical way to define the root of African American and Anglo-American race and class problems as stemming from the corrupt practice of slavery.

Often as well in *And 22 Million . . .*, Weems pairs captioned photographs to dredge up additional imagery. This can be seen in *A Hammer* and *And a Sickle*, which point directly to the history of the Communist International, while *A Bell to Ring* and *A Song to Sing* call forth images of Freedom Riders of the 1960s and the 1950s anthem of the left, Pete Seeger's "If I Had a Hammer."<sup>46</sup> Whatever the order and the pairings of captioned photographs, *And 22 Million Very Tired and Very Angry People* always seems to be able to maintain its storied richness. In the context of the six photographs reproduced in this catalogue, for example, combining *A Hot Spot in a Corrupt World* with *Some Theory*, the rolling pin weapon of *By Any Means Necessary*, the Orisha figure in *A Little Black Magic* and the stances of *An Armed Man* and *A Veiled Woman* (plates 38–43), presents us with a wide gamut of options for resistance against the status quo. From revolutionary writing to a head-splitting rolling pin, from the bearing of arms to the wielding

of hexes, both men and woman can practice arts that stand against injustices in a less than perfect world.

The final level of interpretation which ties the entire installation together may be found in the silk-screened banner texts, which alternate red and white like the colors of the Soviet flag and touch you lightly on the shoulder with their messages as you walk by. As in the captioned photographs, the banners suggest a variety of approaches to effecting change. Whether it is the common sense of Fannie Lou Hamer's call to unity, Franz Fanon's admonition against self-interest, Luisah Teish's hexing of warmongers or the philosophical arguments of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, made new by neo-Marxists Herbert Marcuse or Stuart Hall, Weems asserts the need for different voices to join together and be heard.

Indeed, the thinker who sums up Weems's approach to social change is Italian Marxist-pragmatist Antonio Gramsci, or, perhaps more specifically, Gramsci on the dismantling of racist social constructs, as interpreted by Stuart Hall.<sup>49</sup> Not coincidentally, it is Gramsci's quotation from the *Prison Notebooks* which appears in conjunction with Weems's photograph of *Some Theory* (plate 40): "Every individual is not only the synthesis of contemporary relationships, he is also a summary of the entire past. It may be objected that what each individual can change is very little. This is true up to a point. But since each person can join others who want the same changes, he can multiply himself an imposing number of times. If the change desired is 'rational,' historically possible, then even a very radical change can be achieved, one that did not seem possible at first sight."

In Weems's overarching belief in the historical possibility of full recognition for African Americans as constitutive, rather than additive, parts of American life, the artist professes her belief in Gramsci's ideas:

—that, power structures are not monolithic but rather are historically and culturally specific;

—that, everyone can be a philosopher or intellectual in so far as he or she thinks;

—that, common sense, like folklore, is



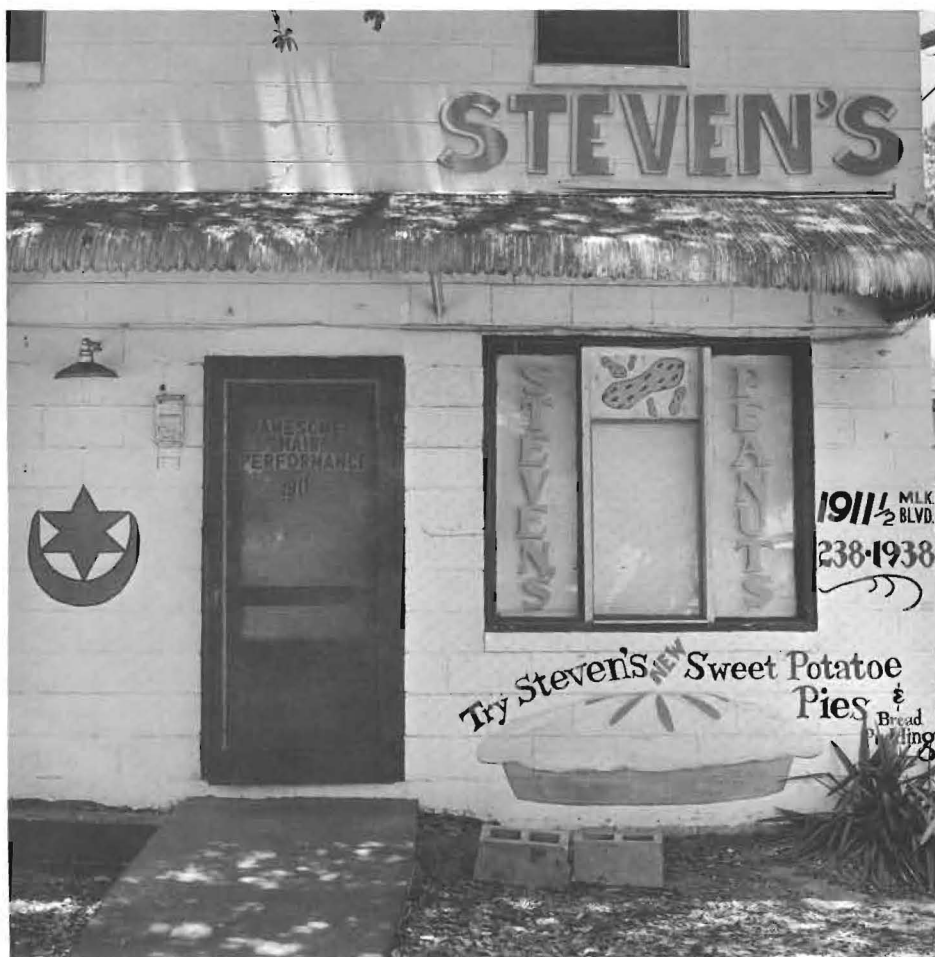


Fig. 12  
*Untitled* (Sea Islands Series)  
*Untitled* (Steven's Pies), 1992 (detail)  
 Silver print, 20 x 20 in.

where the practical consciousness of the people is formed;  
 —that, philosophy provides coherence for such common ideas;  
 —and that, ideologies are not transformed by wholly replacing one with another, but rather by renovating and/or critiquing that which exists in favor of new alignments between different discourses.<sup>50</sup>

Armed with Gramsci's discourse on power, through *And 22 Million Very Tired and Very Angry People*, Weems urges a grass-roots union of the different racial, class and cultural cadres to effect social revolution. The many voices she has chosen to speak their piece, including her own, are dissident, but their positions are not necessarily dissonant. They are, she argues, part of the complexity of life of the late-20th century, a complexity that must be understood and activated to fight against the oversimplified, monolithic mind-set of historically sanctioned oppression. Just as the elements of Weems's

installation, from photograph to caption to quotation, pull together within the work of art, Weems charges us to pull together as individuals so that recognition and unification becomes possible. Through *And 22 Million Very Tired and Very Angry People*, Carrie Mae Weems, as artistic "organizer," challenges us to mend the divisions that fragment American selfhood.

### Postscript

Since completing *And 22 Million* . . . and several related works, including *Commemorating* (1992), "a group of plates bearing the names of Americans who have taken heroic stands for social justice,"<sup>51</sup> Weems has begun to circle back on ideas she first gave voice to in her artist's book *THEN WHAT? Photographs and Folklore*. Taking as her subject the unique folk culture and Gullah dialect of the Sea Islands of Georgia and South Carolina, in 1991 she decided to create a new kind of historical chronicle, one that had more to do with material culture than anything she had made previously.<sup>52</sup>

Stretching back into African American folklore, she approached the Sea Islands as *place* — a meeting ground of positive and negative events and circumstances which had a decided and continuing impact upon African American culture. Jekyll Island was, after all, one of the many southern haunting grounds of the mythic African figure High John de Conquer, as well as the last illegal refuge of the slave trade. Many of the customs, beliefs and language patterns of the region are direct survivals of African patterns once thought lost. Evoking everything from the root word for peanut, *mpinda*, to the verbal sparring of the signifying monkey; from the cures of the midwife to the conjuring ways of hoodoo; from the courageous acts of runaway slaves to the drowning and afterlife of Ibo men, Weems's art provides a clear-eyed commentary on aspects of the creative survival and sufferings of African Americans.<sup>53</sup>

Combining large-format landscape photographs which trace the folkways of the coastal islands' human inhabitants with texts of African American legends and lore, the artist takes us on a search



for Africa, from the time when slaves were brought to America through to the present day (pp. 101–09). Weems then adds a third group of voices in sayings she has printed on the commercial dinner plates from a down-home kitchen. Two such plates appear in fig. 13.

Like writer Robert Farris Thompson in *Flash of the Spirit*, Weems asserts in her new series that much of Africa is to be found here, in the culture of African Americans.<sup>4</sup> She also reminds us of the negative effects produced by the grinding down of the black self-image through slavery and its holdovers in contemporary American culture. Although this *Untitled* (Sea Islands Series) is not yet complete, we again find Carrie Mae Weems delving deep into the essence of African American experience, enlivening and reconstituting its spiritual past at the same time she sheds light on our intricately linked human present.



Fig. 13  
Ceramic plates from  
*Untitled* (Sea Islands Series), 1991-92

#### Notes

1. Bill Nichols, *Ideology and the Image: Social Representation in the Cinema and Other Media* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1981), viii.
2. Statement by the artist in Andrea Miller-Keller, *Carrie Mae Weems/MATRIX 115*, exhibition brochure (Hartford, Conn.: Wadsworth Atheneum), 2.

3. Audre Lorde, "Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference," in *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures*, ed. Russell Ferguson et al. (New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art; Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1990), 281. On the following page Lorde goes on to speak about "a mythical norm, which each one of us within our hearts knows 'that is not me.' In America, this norm is usually defined as white, thin, male, young, heterosexual, christian, and financially secure. It is with this mythical norm that the trappings of power reside within this society." Weems seeks to dissipate the power of this societal myth.

4. Deborah Willis-Thomas, "Weems, Carrie Mae," *An Illustrated Bio-Bibliography of Black Photographers, 1940-1988* (New York: Garland, 1989), 148; Zora Neale Hurston, "How It Feels to Be Colored Me," reprinted in *I Love Myself When I Am Laughing . . . and Then Again When I Am Looking Mean and Impressive: A Zora Neale Hurston Reader*, ed. Alice Walker (Old Westbury, N.Y.: Feminist Press, 1979), 152-55.

5. For a discussion of artists who challenge the traditional uses of documentary photography, see Brian Wallis, "Questioning Documentary," *Aperture* 112 (Fall 1988): 60-71 and Kellie Jones, "In Their Own Image," *Artforum* 29, no. 3 (November 1990): 133-38.

6. The Kamoinge Workshop was an African American photographic movement begun in the 1950s and led by Roy DeCarava.

7. Kellie Jones, "In Their Own Image," 135.

8. James Hall, *Dictionary of Subjects and Symbols in Art* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974).

9. See Kirsh, "Issues in Black, White and Color," present publication, p. 11. Weems has stated that one of her principal goals was to clarify that the roots of the "Negro family problem," discussed in the Moynihan Report, are not found in matriarchy and that black men were still part of the family picture. The report, stereotypically patriarchal in its view, did not focus on the Anglo-American system of suppression, now widely recognized as the root cause of African American familial "disfunction."

10. This idea is first expressed in Barbara Christian's discussion of Zora Neale Hurston's novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. See Barbara Christian, *Black Women Novelists: The Development of a Tradition, 1892-1976*, (Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 1980), 58-61.

11. During this time she also began to create the *S.E. San Diego* series, a fictionalized combination of photographs and captions. See: Kirsh, p. 11.

12. For information on Zora Neale Hurston's role as participant/observer, see Barbara Johnson, "Thresholds of Difference: Structures of Address in Zora Neale Hurston," *Critical Inquiry* 12 (Autumn 1985), 278-89. See also Alan Dundes, *Interpreting Folklore* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980), 7. Dundes was one of the most influential professors in African American folklore at Berkeley. He was one of the first folklorists to state that a family unit should also be seen as a folk unit.

13. According to Julia Hirsch, *Family Photographs: Content, Meaning, and Effect* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), 56, it wasn't until recently that family photos showed the kitchen or bedroom. Generally family photographs were a celebration of material wealth, depicting the living and dining rooms or the outside of the house. It was only in documentary photography's treatment of disadvantaged families, where one room was often the site of all activities, that intimate spaces were pictured, most often by an ethnological outsider. Roy DeCarava may be credited with turning that documentary tradition inside out in his photographs of African American life.

14. Roy DeCarava and Langston Hughes, *The Sweet Flypaper of Life* (Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1984). Compare Weems's sister Alice on the bed (plate 3) and DeCarava's sleeping baby (plate 10); her kitchen scene (plate 7) and his (plates 50 and 53).

15. Although it will not be discussed in this essay, the manner in which the photographs are exhibited adds to the series' meaning. The display technique of photo montage or collage gives the entire installation a familiar feel. Since its popularization by Edward Steichen's 1955 exhibition, *The Family of Man*, this form has become an ubiquitous symbol of informal photo viewing. We see it in family photo walls, magazine layouts, trade shows and annual reports. Such arrangements also telescope time and space into a non-linear order, something Weems's photos and texts explore to full advantage.

16. Hirsch, *Family Photographs*, 118. The tone and content of Weems's family narrative is reminiscent of Hughes's writing in *The Sweet Flypaper of Life*.

17. For a discussion of the mutability of photographic captions, see Jefferson Hunter, "Photographs with Captions," in *Image and Word: The Interaction of Twentieth-Century Photographs and Texts* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1987), 5-32; John Berger, "What Did I See?" in *Another Way of Telling* (New York: Pantheon, 1982), 41-57;

and Rudolf Arnheim, "Words in Their Place," in *Visual Thinking* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), 226-53.

18. Wallis, "Questioning Documentary," *Aperture* (Fall 1988): 64.

19. The recording of who begot whom is tinged with triumph. This is a relatively new element of African American experience. Before emancipation, most black families had difficulty piecing together their lineage, because breaking up the family unit and selling off individual family members was integral to the practice of slavery.

20. In her essay Kirsh speaks of Weems's decision to attend CalArts as being motivated by a crisis of confidence in left-wing politics.

21. Since the "discovery" of Africa by white explorers, there has been no greater contrast effected in our culture than the difference between the use of black and white as symbols. The literature on the subject is vast. In her own study and teaching, some of materials cited by the artist include: Winthrop D. Jordan, "First Impressions: Initial English Confrontation with Africans," in *White over Black: American Attitudes toward the Negro, 1550-1812* (New York: Norton, 1977); Ronald T. Takaki, *Iron Cages: Race and Culture in Nineteenth-Century America* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1979); Leslie A. Fiedler, "The Blackness of Darkness: E. A. Poe and the Development of the Gothic," in *Love and Death in the American Novel* (New York: Criterion Books, 1960); George M. Frederickson, *The Black Image in the White Mind: The Debate on Afro-American Character and Destiny, 1817-1914* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972); Sander L. Gilman, "Black Sexuality and Modern Consciousness," in *Difference and Pathology: Stereotypes of Sexuality, Race, and Madness* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1985); and Sander L. Gilman, "Black Bodies, White Bodies: Toward an Iconography of Female Sexuality in Late Nineteenth-Century Art, Medicine, and Literature," *Critical Inquiry* 12 (Autumn 1985): 204-42.

22. Alan Dundes, *Interpreting Folklore* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980); Sander L. Gilman, *Difference and Pathology* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1985); and Arthur G. Miller, ed., *In the Eye of the Beholder: Contemporary Issues in Stereotyping* (New York: Praeger, 1982).

23. See Walter G. Stephan and David Rosenfield, "Racial and Ethnic Stereotypes," in Arthur G. Miller, ed., *Contemporary Issues in Stereotyping*, 101-07.



24. Dundes, *Interpreting Folklore*, 61.

25. Dundes, *Interpreting Folklore*, 54.

26. Dundes, *Interpreting Folklore*, 65–66.

Echoing Dundes's views, Weems wrote that *Ain't Jokin* "deals exclusively with the stereotyping of Afro-Americans by whites. Black or White, when dealing with the question of racism, we get ta itchin' under our skin, our temperatures rise, our lips quiver; still the major problem of the twentieth century is that of the color line. . . . Folklore taps right at the core of these ugly little prevailing attitudes and is for this reason an excellent socio-psychological barometer." From artist's statement, *Prisoners of Image: Ethnic and Gender Stereotypes*, exhibition catalogue (New York: Alternative Museum, 1989), 29.

27. Adrian Piper's card reads as follows:

"Dear Friend,

I am black.

I am sure you did not realize this when you made/laughed at/agreed with that racist remark. In the past, I have attempted to alert white people to my racial identity in advance. Unfortunately, this invariably causes them to react to me as pushy, manipulative, or socially inappropriate. Therefore, my policy is to assume that white people do not make these remarks, even when they believe there are no black people present, and to distribute this card when they do.

I regret any discomfort my presence is causing you, just as I am sure you regret the discomfort your racism is causing me."

28. In these works Weems may have been following the example of Barbara Kruger, whose art she admires, as well as paralleling the work of Richard Prince. In 1986 Prince created a series entitled *Jokes*, appropriating *New Yorker* cartoons. In continuing to develop the series, he created silk-screened canvases featuring one-liners and burlesque-based jokes that deal with American sexual fantasies and frustrated desires.

29. This combination of image and text also may be seen as connecting military service to citizenship in another way. There are many who acknowledge that the Civil Rights movement was hastened by World War II. After so many deaths in the name of freedom, African American "citizens" were not willing to be deprived of full civil rights at home for long.

30. *Mirror, Mirror* (plate 11) also speaks to the issue of the negative physiognomic stereotype which becomes, in this case, a self-imaging

problem. As Dundes describes in *Interpreting Folklore*, 49, consulting the mirror in the Snow White fairy tale is destructive because it does not allow for any diversity. Dundes comments that there is not much chance for a positive black self-image if these are the values that come from white folklore.

31. Michele Wallace, "Modernism, Postmodernism and the Problem of the Visual in Afro-American Culture," in *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures*, ed. Russell Ferguson et al. (New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art; Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1990), 40.

32. Andrea Miller-Keller, *Carrie Mae Weems/MATRIX 115*, exhibition brochure (Hartford, Conn.: Wadsworth Atheneum), 3–4. *Ain't Jokin* has always elicited strong criticism from African American and liberal Anglo-American communities because of its racist content. Weems believes, however, that airing such oppressive material to better talk about racism does not perpetuate it.

33. Carrie Mae Weems, *And 22 Million Very Tired and Very Angry People*, catalogue for the 1992 Adaline Kent Award Exhibition (San Francisco: San Francisco Art Institute, 1992), endnote. *Ode to Affirmative Action* moves away from the co-optation of African American forms by white songwriters and the music industry since the days of early minstrelsy to establish what is the authentic musical contribution of African American culture.

34. Carrie Mae Weems, *THEN WHAT? Photographs and Folklore*, artist's book (Buffalo, N.Y.: CEPA Gallery, 1990).

35. DeCarava, *Sweet Flypaper of Life*, book jacket.

36. Weems began creating fictions in her photo-narrative *S.E. San Diego* and in her 1980s artist's books, *Blues & Pinks* and *Vanishing Cream*, which dealt with sexual and racist issues respectively. For information on artists' books, see Shelley Rice, "Words and Images: Artists' Books as Visual Literature," 59–85, and Clive Phillpot, "Some Contemporary Artists and Their Books," 97–132, in *Artists' Books: A Critical Anthology and Sourcebook*, ed. Joan Lyons (Rochester, N.Y.: Visual Studies Workshop Press, 1985).

37. Baldessari's interrupted narratives, such as *Movie Storyboard: Norma's Story* (1974), often used found imagery as an analogue to language. The format of *Untitled* is related to film and video as well, from the text leaders used in silent films through to the reproduction of film stills documenting woman-based narratives cre-



ated by such video artists as Martha Rosler, Cecilia Condit and Dara Birnbaum.

38. Stephen Heath, *The Sexual Fix* (New York: Schocken Books, 1984), 85.

39. From August 1989 through 1990, Weems created the photographs. She began with the man's story, including a set of images of the man looking in from the outside, which was never used. She then created the "girlfriends," using friend and photographer Joan Braderman as one of her actors. The last was the child's series, for which a friend's child posed. Weems began working on the written texts after most of the photographs were completed. According to the artist, the first draft had a bitter sound and was told completely from woman's point of view, based upon her own experiences. Desiring a more open series of voices and after speaking with a friend to garner a man's point of view, she turned to song lyrics and popular phrases. This material, when edited and embellished, formed texts for *Untitled*.

40. This series is Weems's answer to Laura Mulvey's important, yet potentially debilitating article, "Visual Pleasure and the Narrative Cinema," *Screen* 16, no. 3 (Autumn 1975): 6-18. Reprinted in *Art after Modernism: Rethinking Representation*, ed. Brian Wallis (New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art; Boston: David R. Godine, 1984).

41. Calvin Reid, "Carrie Mae Weems," *Arts Magazine* 65, no. 5 (January 1991): 79.

42. Laura Trippi, *And 22 Million Very Tired and Very Angry People*, exhibition brochure (New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1991).

43. Richard Wright and Edwin Rosskam, *12 Million Black Voices: A Folk History of the Negro in the United States* (New York: Viking, 1941), 146-47.

44. "Beauties of the Common Tool: A portfolio by Walker Evans," *Fortune* 52, no. 1 (July 1955): 103-07.

45. In his portfolio Evans compares the hardware store to a kind of offbeat museum, where forms are wedded to function, elegance, candor and purity.

46. This quotation was taken by the artist from *By Any Means Necessary: Speeches, Interviews and a Letter by Malcolm X*, ed. George Breitman (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1970).

47. In the brochure for the exhibition of *And 22 Million Very Tired and Very Angry People* at the New Museum, Laura Trippi describes these

two images as follows: "While the musket [actually a rifle] held by the black man in the cropped image 'An Armed Man' . . . suggests the period of the Civil War, the image of 'A Veiled Woman,' her sheer black veil held aloft to shield her face, conjures up the memory of the Algerian War against French colonial occupation, and the explosive, influential film about that war, *The Battle of Algiers*."

48. Trippi, *And 22 Million* . . . exhibition brochure.

49. Antonio Gramsci's theories are articulated in *Prison Notebooks* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1975). See also Stuart Hall, "Gramsci's Relevance for the Study of Race and Ethnicity," *Journal of Communication Inquiry*, 10, no. 2 (Summer 1986): 5-27. The Hall essay provides an overview of Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks* and an analysis of the importance of Gramsci's theories for revolutionary Marxist politics today.

50. Stuart Hall, "Gramsci's Relevance," *Journal of Communication Inquiry* (Summer 1986): 19-21; 23-26.

51. Carrie Mae Weems, *And 22 Million Very Tired and Very Angry People* (San Francisco: San Francisco Art Institute), endnote. Other works in the fore-mentioned exhibition based on a similar theme include: the earlier *Ode to Affirmative Action* installation (1989); *Untitled* (1992), which consists of photomontages using Civil Rights movement photographs; and *In the Midst of the Storm* (1992), "an installation of bottles of Black Pride body ointment and screened wall text."

52. Weems had been interested in the Sea Islands since her coursework in the 1980s with Dr. Lydia Parrish, a Berkeley folklorist famous for her studies on St. Helena in the Georgia Sea Islands. She also was aware of Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe's lovely photographs of ex-slaves and their descendants on Daufuskie Island in South Carolina. See *Daufuskie Island: A Photographic Essay*, with a foreword by Alex Haley (Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press, 1982).

53. For an introduction to the wealth of African American folklore, see Alan Dundes, *Mother Wit from the Laughing Barrel: Readings in the Interpretation of Afro-American Folklore* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1973).

54. Robert Farris Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy* (New York: Random House, 1983).