Invisible Women:
The Re-Presentation of African-American Women in the Photography of Lorna Simpson and Carrie Mae Weems

by

Obidimma O. Okobi
Class of 1998

A thesis submitted to the faculty of Wesleyan University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Bachelor of Arts with Departmental Honors from Art History

Middletown, Connecticut April 8, 1998
To my Mom,
my family,
KT doodle doodle, and to those
who believe in the essence
rather than the form.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements

Introduction  1

Photography as Postmodern Art  7


Carrie Mae Weems and The Multitude of African-American Being in the Untitled: Kitchen Table Series (1990)  51

Conclusion  71

Appendix I: Lorna Simpson
  Irene, 1979
  Screen I, 1986
  Waterbearer, 1982
  Untitled (Two Necklines), 1989
  Necklines, 1989
  Three Seated Figures, 1989
  Stereo Styles, 1988
  Plaques, 1988
  Same, 1991
  Flipside, 1991
  You're Fine, 1989

Appendix II: Carrie Mae Weems
  Blue-Black Boy, 1989-90
  Honey-Colored Boy, 1989-90
  from Untitled (Kitchen Table Series), 1990:
    Man and Mirror
    Man Smoking
    Man Eating Lobster
    Woman Feeding Bird
    Woman Playing Solitaire
    Woman and Daughter with Children
    Woman with Friends
    Woman and Daughter
    Woman and Daughter with Makeup
    Nude

Bibliography  73
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank my Mom for all the support and assistance that she has given me throughout this process. If it hadn’t been for her, I’d still be trying to write a dissertation instead of an honors thesis. To Sara, thank you for providing me with the best intellectually stimulating procrastination ever known to a writer. To the Witches of Weswick, who have the power... This work would not have been possible if it were not for my dear friends MaryLiz Williamson and Katie Kessler (True, True), who reminded me that I could articulate this culmination of my entire intellectual process.

Also, I would like to extend my sincerest thanks to professors Peter Mark, Lily Milroy, Tom Huhn, Ellen D’Oench, Andy Szegedy-Maszak, Joseph Siry, Sarah Rich, and David Levine for all of the time and help that they gave to me as I delved deeper and deeper in this work. Especially Peter, who emphatically encouraged me to LOOK at the photographs, again and again. Thank you, in advance, to my readers, Profs. Ellen D’Oench, Peter Mark and Gayle Pemberton. Krishna Winston enabled me to express my ideas more articulately and clearly than I would have ever been able to alone. I owe her—big time. Thank you so much.

I express my heartfelt appreciation to Scott Catto, Director of P.P.O.W. Gallery in New York City. His candid, insightful knowledge about Carrie Mae Weems and her work helped me to truly explore the depth of her work. Also, to Patterson Sims at the Museum of Modern Art, who has been so encouraging about my intellectual pursuits and so generous to me. Without his assistance, I would have never had the invaluable opportunity to speak personally with Lorna Simpson. Ms. Simpson gave me one of the most memorable art experiences of my life. Her obvious intellectual knowledge and creative vision single-handedly inspired me to pursue this subject. She also reminded me of the importance of venturing outside the realm of academia, and back into the sensory experience of the visual.

Special thanks to Prof. John Paoletti, my faculty advisor, who helped me realize that I could be “The Little Engine that Could,” to Nikki Mayhew ‘97, who helped me believe; Monique Sulle, who always managed to check up on me in the nick of time; to Rachel Kowal and the Wesleyan women’s lacrosse team 1998, who kept me laughing, running, and organized beyond my wildest dreams. Those women reminded me that personal expression comes in many forms and I can only hope that each of them understands that, ultimately, this work is the greatest single expression of my time here. Without them, though, my investigation could not have evolved as much as it has. And for this, I am eternally grateful.

If I have neglected to mention anyone, I apologize. You know that I could not have done this without you.

Finally, to all those who are able to realize the essence rather than the form, you always point out that there is, indeed, something most rare within as well as without.
INTRODUCTION

To put it boldly, the new kind of critic and artist associated with the new cultural politics of difference consists of an energetic breed of New World bricoleurs with improvisational and flexible sensibilities that sidestep mere opportunism and mindless eclecticism; persons from all countries, cultures, genders, sexual orientations, ages and regions with protean identities who avoid ethnic chauvinism and faceless universalism; intellectual freedom-fighters with partisan passion, international perspectives, and, thank God, a sense of humor that combats the ever-present absurdity that forever threatens our democratic and libertarian projects and dampens the fire that fuels our will to struggle. —Cornel West.

Truer words were never written. In “the New Cultural Politics of Difference,” Cornel West’s words encapsulate the vision of both Lorna Simpson and Carrie Mae Weems. As African-American women photographers, these women confront and contest notions of truth, identity, gender, and race through visual imagery. In the advent of postmodernity, much has been spoken and written about the contestation of authenticity, originality, and existing contexts. However, the perspective, thoughtful analysis or critique by nonwhite intellectuals and artists is often not acknowledged, and sometimes disregarded within the dialectic.

Within the last decade or so, the voices and visions of nonwhite groups have received great attention, emerging from invisibility. In particular, African-American women have asserted an elegant multi-dimensional vision of humanity in the pursuit of a reclamation of their social and cultural history. As part of two oppressed groups, African-American women are rendered doubly invisible by U.S. society. Jacqueline Bobo remarks in her essay “Black Women in Fiction and Nonfiction: Images of Power and Powerlessness” that each derogatory representation of black
women serves as a signifier for the time in which it is produced, and each has currency and a use value for that time. Categorizing the various depictions of black women in the American mass media, her classifications include the overbearing matriarch, the sexually promiscuous female, the domineering ‘Sapphire,’ the domestic servant, and the welfare mother. All five categories function as a means of stereotyping already exaggerated aspects of the female personality. In providing the masses with these labels by which African-American women can be dehumanized, the producers and creators of mass-media images perpetuate the myth of racial inferiority. Using a combination of image and language, Lorna Simpson and Carrie Mae Weems provide their audiences with a new currency that makes the viewer aware that meaning depends upon context, association, and power.\(^1\) Within their portrayals of the African-American female, Simpson and Weems raise her from the position of “sexual object,” elevating an archetypal black woman to a place where she stands defiant of Western society’s dehumanizing gaze, confident with the implicit knowledge of her worth, history, and legitimate place in humanity. Curators James Rondeau and Andrea Miller-Keller point out that “Language has turned out to be more important to the contemporary visual arts than at any previous time in art history.” Citing its significance in the vocabulary of major European art movements such Cubism, Dadaism, and Surrealism, Rondeau and Miller-Keller assert that language is used for the beauty and design of its visual characteristics: “Language is

used for telling stories, both personal and fictive. It is used as a catalyst to reveal associative and subconscious readings of both images and words. It is used to present social and political critiques, and relocate ‘found content’ into a formal art context in order to heighten our awareness of this content. Perhaps, most importantly, language is used to explore the meaning and structure of language itself.”

Usurping the hallmark concepts of postmodernity as former documentary photographers, both Simpson and Weems ask the questions: Who makes the images? Who are the subjects? and Who is the intended audience? Art historian and critic Kellie Jones suggests that African-American photography is a “fusion between the schools of straight, or documentary photography, and symbolic or metaphoric photography.”

In “Venus Rising: The Personal as Critical,” Farah Jasmine Griffin brilliantly explains the emergence of African-American woman photographers as a part of a black feminist effort to “establish a language and analytic framework for exploring the various ways women experience oppression.” African-American women were among the first to challenge the normative “woman” posited by white feminist studies of women’s lives, experience, and creativity. Having challenged the normative position,

---

women of color were naturally among the first to call for a criticism and a theoretical framework that takes into account the subjectivity of the critic.⁴

This new criticism and framework functions as a tool of deconstruction for African-American women, a group that has been traditionally constructed as object and Other. Their works view the world through a lens of history and politics, as well as psychoanalytic, feminist, and structuralist theory.⁵ However, as these women seek to privilege personal experience, they do not ignore other critical discourse. In the case of artists, the assertion of personal experience within art also includes previous art movements, such as minimalism, conceptualism, and in some cases, cubism. bell hooks extends Tompkins’s assertion, suggesting that “the split between public and private is deeply connected to ongoing practices of oppression.... The public reality and institutional structures of domination make the private space for oppression and exploitation concrete—real.”⁶

The works of both Lorna Simpson and Carrie Mae Weems are culminations of the personal brought into critical discourse. In The Alchemy of Race and Rights: Diary of a Law Professor, Patricia Williams “[writes] in a way that reveals the intersubjectivity of legal constructions, forcing the reader both to participate in the construction of meaning and to be conscious of that process.”⁷ Similarly, within their respective works, Lorna Simpson and Carrie Mae Weems create an unspoken

---

⁵ Farah Jasmine Griffin. “Venus Rising: The Personal as Critical.”
dialogue among artist, image, and viewer. However, works of art are free from the constraint of law: objective language that obscures the absurdities of the logic behind domination. African-American women have long been constructed as stupid, anti-intellectual, non-critical, crazy, and lascivious; within the following critical investigation of Simpson’s and Weems’s re-presentation of the African-American woman, one witnesses how these women challenge the objectivity of photography and provide a new image and language through which African-American women can both see and articulate themselves. Kellie Jones suggests that “image/texts are prevalent among and executed with particular elegance by contemporary women of color, perhaps because it is a form well suited to their need to define and make themselves known in a world that denies their visibility.” While Simpson subverts language and defies photography’s exploitative capacities, Weems links photography to the influences of oral history and an understanding of storytelling, legend, folk homily, and superstition. In essence, like their academic contemporaries, Simpson and Weems use systems of language as a means of revealing the complex dynamics of black life, and in doing so, of challenging dominant society’s assumptions about that life.

In reading this thesis of the work of Lorna Simpson and Carrie Mae Weems, please remember the following words of African-American artist Lorraine O’Grady

---

9 Fatimah Tobing Rony. “We Must first See Ourselves.”
for their eloquent expression of the importance of self-representation in African-American women’s art production:

To name ourselves rather than be named, we must first see ourselves... So long unmirrored, we may have forgotten how we look. Nevertheless, we can’t theorize in a void: we must have evidence. And we—I speak only for black women here—have barely begun to articulate our life experience.... For at the end of every path we take, we find a body that is always already colonized. A body that has been raped, maimed, murdered—that is what we must give a healthy present.
PHOTOGRAPHY AS POSTMODERN ART

As a technical means of reproduction and replication, photography has been polemical since its invention in the late nineteenth century. Walter Benjamin wrote in “Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” that “around 1900 technical reproduction had reached a standard that not only permitted it to reproduce all transmitted works and thus to cause the most profound change in their impact upon the public; it also captured a place of its own among artistic processes.”¹ In his essay, Benjamin asserts that the mass dissemination of replicated images results in a loss of the original work’s “aura,” or innate uniqueness. He goes further, equating attempts to sustain “aura” with fascism, and implies that the regime of Adolf Hitler and the National Socialists of Germany used spectacle as a means to provide an absolute uniqueness for the party.

Benjamin anticipates the emergence of photography—not to mention video, and television—as dominant sites of art production in “Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.”² His fears about the repercussions of mass reproduction were justified for the turbulent period in which he lived; he wrote years before art

² Written in 1936, Benjamin’s examination of the impact of the technology on modern methods of reproduction—film and photography—and on the reception of works of art is anticipated in his earlier essays, “A Small History of Photography” and “The Storyteller,” published in 1936 and 1931, respectively. Interestingly, at the time of publication, Mechanical Reproduction was not received well as a contemporary theory of art. Posthumously, Benjamin has come to be regarded as the great German cultural critic of the first half of the 20th century.
photography became comparable with painting and sculpture as a method of artistic creation. The essay itself confronts the ironic paradox of photography as both a form of art and a means of mass cultural dissemination. Within the last twenty years, photography has not only emerged as an artistic equivalent, it has become a popular medium. No longer interested by the inaccessibility of modern art movements—minimalism, and conceptualism, to name a few—by the middle of the 1970s artists began looking toward previously disregarded or unknown media as art forms. Land art, site-specific architecture, video and mixed media as well as photography are some examples of the resulting art forms. In “Crisis of the Real,” Andy Grundberg explains postmodernism as an attack on modernism, or “an undercutting of the basic assumptions of the role of art in culture and about the role of the artist in relation to his or her art.”

As a result of this shift, postmodern photography emerged as part of a continuum within postmodernism that deconstructs what the public has come to recognize as art, and questions concepts and assumptions that have historically been taken for granted. Grundberg’s essay chronicles and illuminates the emergence of art photography as a dominant art form at the end of the twentieth century; however, he does not attribute this phenomenon to the increased inclusion of underrepresented and formerly disregarded artists within Western art. It is clear, however, that the widespread success of women photographers, photographers of color, and gay

---

photographers coincides with what Grundberg refers to as a “self-conscious awareness of being in a camera-based and camera-bound culture.” For these photographers, the camera functions aptly because of its ubiquity and its capacity for use as the purveyor of diverse modes of expression.

Grundberg asserts that deconstructionism and structuralism are two additional distinguishing entities of postmodernism. Structuralism is a theory of language and knowledge based upon the work of Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure; it is linked closely to the studies of semiotics by Charles S. Pierce—the theory of signs and symbols and their relationship to artificially constructed and natural languages. These theories share the belief that things in the world—literary texts, images, etc.—do not wear their meanings on their sleeves. They must be deciphered in order to be understood. In other words, things have a “deeper structure” than common sense permits us to comprehend, and structuralism purports to offer a method that allows us to penetrate that deeper structure. Structuralism basically divides language into two elements: the signifier and the signified, with the former pointing to the latter. Words do not contain pure a priori meaning or

---

4 Grundberg, 3.
5 Ibid, 7.
6 In Barbara Johnson’s translation of Jacques Derrida’s Dissemination, deconstruction is explained as etymologically related to the “analysis,” in the sense that it undoes what has been formerly presented as Truth. This contrasts with the popular notion that to deconstruct is “to destroy” what is scrutinized. Derrida suggests that deconstruction does not point out the flaws or weaknesses or stupidities of an author (in this case, an artist), but the necessity with which what he does see is systematically related to what he does not see, xv.
7 Ibid, 3.
experience. According to Grundberg, this is the premise of postmodern art, and specifically characterizes contemporary photography.  

As persons who distribute benefits to society in which images are disseminated on a mass scale through television, the print media (i.e., magazines and newspapers), and information technology, postmodern artists often combine images with text in their creative vision. Artists such as Sherrie Levine and Richard Prince use photography as methods of questioning and masking authenticity, originality, and other traditional assumptions in Western art. For Levine, appropriation means making a copy print of other artists’ work (such as After Edward Weston, 1979, and After Rodechenko) and claiming it as her own, whereas Prince photographs images that he sees in magazines in an attempt to unmask the language of advertising photography. For these artists as well as others, photography points out the fact that the meaning of images is always a matter of their context. Considering the thousands of images that daily pass before the eyes of the public, through television, magazines, and even photocopies, photography has become the common coin of cultural image exchange.  

The photo/text serves as: (1) a commentary on the complex meanings and structures of language and (2) an articulation of how photography functions in the

---

8 In my investigation, I make the assumption that much of modernism alienates the uninformed art viewer. This alienation occurs because of modernism’s focus on acutely formal and technical elements of high art of which most of the general public is not aware. However, I am not asserting that modern art is devoid of content; rather, modern art tends to consist of content that rarely draws from concepts outside of theoretical art discourse. Discussion of modernism and my assertions of its shortcomings are beyond the scope of my thesis.
postmodern age. Through such commentary, contemporary photography questions and masks authenticity, originality, and individuality while unmasking and critiquing art's past and today's society. In his essay "In the Text," Howard Singerman relates the photograph to imagery in language. He asserts that art photography's nuances and metaphoric, intellectual detail parallel those existent in literature.\(^9\) Within linguistic systems of replacements and substitutions, meanings are exchanged for one another rather than for absolute meaning or truth or being; "the substitute does not substitute itself for anything which has somehow existed before it." And in the absence of any absolute meaning, the domain and play of signification [extends] indefinitely, lending itself to the polysemous nature of postmodern work.\(^11\) For women artists, including women photographers of color and gays, postmodernism allowed them to capitalize upon the ambiguity of language.

In Reframings: New American Feminist Photographies, Diane Neumaier remarks that although feminist theory has offered analytical models of mass culture upon which feminist image makers rely, it has analyzed far less thoroughly alternative feminist images. The same statement can be made about postmodern photography theory: much has been written on the topic, but significantly less has been written about those photographers who fall outside the mainstream (i.e., those

\(^9\) Ibid, 11.
\(^10\) Photography does not aspire to be literary. Rather, photography shares formal communicative and creative abilities with literature.
\(^11\) Singerman, 164.
who are not white). Art historian Abigail Solomon-Godeau eloquently theorizes “the politics of self-representing social awareness.” Solomon-Godeau asserts that questions of authorship, subjectivity, and uniqueness are built into the nature of the photographic process; issues devolving on the simulacrum, the stereotype, and the social and sexual positioning of the viewing object are central to the production of advertising and other mass-media forms of photography. Consideration of photography in terms of media imaging is relevant because of its omnipresence within society. Artists such as Cindy Sherman and Louise Lawler, as well as Lorna Simpson and Carrie Mae Weems, often use conventions of photography within the images that they create.

In contrast to Grundberg, Solomon-Godeau asserts that the shift in emphasis to the politics of self-representation is a consequence of production by and recognition of “minority,” or nonwhite cultural producers, for whom the enterprise of self-representation has a singular historical and political import. Though Solomon-Godeau details the polemic of feminist self-representation, her assertions regarding the singularity of ‘other’ artists are overly general. For many artists of color, specifically Simpson and Weems, the representation of the African-American female functions on many levels. Simpson’s use of texts, allegorical images, and figures challenges the viewer to grasp contextual meaning from these subjects and

---

13 _Art After Modernism_, 80.
14 Solomon-Godeau, 299.
objects, just as Dadaists like Marcel Duchamp appropriated mundane objects in “ready-mades.”

In her postmodern conceptual photo/texts Simpson questions notions of identity and meaning in a way that is distinct from what Solomon-Godeau refers to as “the amelioration of black subjects.” She goes further, stating that Simpson and other African-American women artists like Carrie Mae Weems, Renee Green, and Adrian Piper substitute “‘positive’ for ‘negative’ representations” of African-Americans. However, a close analysis of Carrie Mae Weems’s work depicts a vision of African-Americans as people, not necessarily ‘good’ or ‘bad.’ Particularly during the first years following emancipation and even during the Black Power movement of the 1960s, Afro-Americans portrayed themselves in ways that countered their historic pejorative depiction. Examples include the black heroines of Harlem Renaissance literature, and the righteous ‘black folk’ of Langston Hughes’s short fiction. However, the work of Simpson and Weems during the late 1980s and early 1990s uses techniques of absence and presence in their depiction of African-American women as multifaceted individuals. Looking particularly at Weems’s Untitled: Kitchen Table series, one witnesses a central female figure imbued with an array of realistic human emotions, rather than a limited number. In “Representing

---

15 Solomon Godeau, 296.
16 See Chapter Three. Investigation of the Kitchen Table series reveals the many aspects of Weems’s archetypal African-American woman who is, specifically and literally, herself. Her central figure dotes on her lover, anguishs over her loss of independence as a result of motherhood, and revels in her being—a being that is unapologetically sensual, sexual, and powerful. In order not to repeat myself
Representation,” Solomon-Godeau comments that “many lesbian photographers have photographed themselves, their lovers, and their communities motivated by the belief that photographic self-representations are not only empowering in and of themselves, but, even more important, further the process of political consolidation and mobilization.”\textsuperscript{17} This observation can be extended to include African-American photographers. However, it is of crucial import that audiences view works and read critical analyses of these works—whether the works are produced by African-Americans, Latinas, Asian-Americans, lesbians, white women, or women who are a part of more than one of the above groups—as works of art in their own right, not as assimilations into the (white, male) Western notion of artist. Their respective producers create works that are comparable, though not interchangeable with, already existent works.

A close investigation of selected works by Lorna Simpson and Carrie Mae Weems during the late 1980s through 1990 shows how these artists have used art photography not only to assert the multilayeredness of the African-American female but also to express eloquently their creative vision.\textsuperscript{18} Simpson’s work re-presents the depiction of narrative or allegorical representation that is open to speculation.

\textsuperscript{17} Solomon-Godeau, 297.
\textsuperscript{18} Simpson and Weems began their careers in the arts with different specializations. Weems originally danced, receiving her first Bachelor of Arts in dance at the California Institute of the Arts in 1981. Simpson was originally a painter at the School of Visual Arts in New York, receiving her Bachelor’s in Fine Arts in 1982. During her graduate studies at the University of California, San Diego, Simpson’s interest in photography blossomed; originally investigating documentary
Concerned with how photography functions as proof and evidence, Simpson uses a combination of text with “straight” photography to pose questions bearing on identity and the dominant gaze. Simpson reveals a critical analysis of photography in a manner that mimics anthropologist Z. T. Zealy’s method of scientific documentation of African slaves. Simpson removes her subjects from their environment and places them into her constructed studio, but this decontextualization defines and justifies African difference in a way that challenges the viewer to reconsider how viewers have come to a definition of black people and “most importantly, to confront the processes in which viewers have done so.”

However, rather than perpetuating dynamics of subjugation and degradation, Simpson uses techniques similar to Zealy’s in order to subvert the commonly held ideas.

Today, photography functions as a language of images manipulated through contemporary culture. Artists like John Baldesarri, Bernard and Hella Becher, and Joseph Kosuth have also used photography and/or language as an instrument of exclusion as well as inclusion that provides a grammar enabling people to understand and compare different structures, be they architectural or linguistic, when transformed into works of art.

---

photography, Simpson shifted her work away from that as she became disenchanted with the unbalanced power dynamic between subject, artist, and audience.

19 Ibid, 25.
21 Ibid., 135.
Simpson comments in an interview with Trevor Fairbrother that she is interested in creating art that addresses a large audience, rather than just the academic community. Referring specifically to her *Gestures/Reenactments* piece, Simpson states that her work “evokes elements of documentary that [she both likes and dislikes]—the way people read gesture and the way they read a photograph.” She continues to discuss the stereotypes that are often extrapolated from gestures, particularly those of black men, who are assumed to be suspect and a threat to society: “Without even seeing his face anyone, black or white, might imagine [the model’s poses] to be confrontational, defiant, or indicative of a number of other emotions.”

Her shift in photographic format occurred, in part, because of the limitations of documentary photography. Frustrated with what she calls “a silent agreement between the photographer and the viewer about the intentions and meaning of a work,” Simpson once stated that “documentary [photography] can be pure voyeurism.” As a member of two historically misrepresented groups, Simpson has committed herself to countering the victimization of nonwhite subjects in photography. Using various sources of inspiration, including social game books from the 1940s and 1950s, children’s games and word plays, Simpson points out the logic of power relations that are present as subtexts everywhere in U.S. society.

---

22 Fairbrother interview with the artist, 175-6.
23 In the Fairbrother interview, Simpson talks about how *Plaques* alludes to the children’s game “Rock/Paper/Scissors.” One plaque reads “Rock, Paper, Scissors,” while the other reads “It was impossible to make sense of the natural order of things, being dark and heavy-handed.” The work
The photography exhibition catalog *Vivid: Intense Images by American Photographers* chronicles the photography boom of the 1980s and presents the work of 17 contemporary artists, including Lorna Simpson and Carrie Mae Weems. In the essay “Heroes” Jerry Saltz discusses the catapulting of the hyperrealist medium to the art world. He states that “[i]n the 1980s photography turned itself inside out, becoming all things to all mediums. The camera and other means of reproduction had already played an important role in 1970s Conceptualism, which frequently juxtaposed text and photographic images.” Effectively differentiating between the documentation of the ephemeral art forms (i.e., Christo’s and Jeanne-Claude’s massive site-specific works), and the evolution of art photography itself, Saltz continues:

By the late 1970s a number of artists began focusing increasingly on the photograph itself. These artists recognized that we live in a world of images and that these images supply much of our information about the world. They became fascinated with the power of the photograph and they sought to both harness and deconstruct this power... These artists—many of them women—wanted to give rise to something more than ritualized expression.

Photography’s quickly produced, hyperrealistic qualities are attractive to many artists who confront issues of racism, sexism, homophobia, ageism, and identity in their work. In regard to photography and postmodernism, the photograph’s inescapable portrayal “of something lends itself to its position as a

functions on many levels, dealing with power relations and orchestrated violence. Though Simpson did not intentionally address this, she notes that the fist sign, or Rock, evokes representations of force, particularly the “Black Power” sign, while Scissors looks exactly like the peace sign popular in the 1960s. In the game, ‘Rock’ smashes ‘Scissors,’ ‘Scissors’ cuts ‘Paper,’ and ‘Paper’ covers ‘Rock.’ These coincidences and their implications, in and of themselves, present interesting questions that will be explored further in Chapter Two. See Fairbrother, 177.
referent to something outside itself.” Kathryn Hixson remarks that “[c]onsequently, photography is exempt from the dead-end self-referentiality of Modernism, and therefore quite attractive for. . . artists searching for postmodern strategies appropriate for their experience.” She suggests brilliantly that “this referential nature of photography is also critical to artists interested in deconstructing the societal production of systems of representation, that mediate power relationships within the production of culture.”

This situation presents the quintessential method for artists to challenge and critique their perspective as key, though often disregarded, players in critical art and art historical discourse. In “Vivid,” Judith Russi Kirshner comments, “many artists have internalized the significance of ownership and authorship of bodies, languages and looks.” She refers to Simpson’s combination of text and images of conflated body parts in her rejection of “stereotypical language and dominating gazes.” Acutely conscious of the politics of self-representation within the postmodern dialectic, Kirshner notes that “[Simpson’s] work is crisply stylish and defiant in withholding personal contact or even eye contact in which a power dynamic is constituted. . . Through the hand gestures and strong backs of her characters, her viewers are asked to confront their own prejudices.”

75 Kirshner, 24.
In contrast to Simpson’s cool, cerebral challenge to hegemonic notions of African-American female identity, Carrie Mae Weems’s *Untitled: Kitchen Table* series of 1990 presses her audience to ask similar questions regarding identity and assumed interpretation of African-American women through relatively warmer, more cordial means. By cropping the table halfway in the frame, Weems places her viewers at the other end of the table as guests and/ or silent participants in her confrontation of the “manufacture of identity of the female within societally dictated confines of racial difference.” In “Revolutions in Vision: Black Women, Aesthetics and Visual Politics,” Lisa Collins explains the historical use of the photography as a means of objectification and documentation of race inferiority. Using examples from the first appearances of the reproduced image, the daguerreotype, Collins points out how select groups of African-American artists and other diasporic artists have used the conventions of the cataloguing of difference in their reclamation of significance.

“Myths gain strength when linked to visual representation.” By changing the nature of what is being represented, artists assert the need to abandon the myths about the sexuality and dehumanization of the black female that continue to be accepted today.

Using photography in conjunction with texts, artists are able to challenge the viewer’s desire to read bodily evidence in the work. In presenting an alternative way of viewing and defining the black female image, Weems and Simpson reveal the dual

---

possibilities of photography. Both artists began with studies in documentary photography and became frustrated with the dichotomy between the depicted underprivileged (African-American) subjects of street photography and the audience that viewed them in the comfort of the gallery space or the living room.

In particular, Carrie Mae Weems shows us images that press the viewer to delve deeper into the photograph than has previously been asked. In her criticism of documentary photography, she asks “if the genre could allow her to create images of African-Americans that would be able to ‘rise above the depiction of blacks always as the victim of the gaze.’”

Interested in unmasking issues of the intention, use, and influence of language and image, Weems frequently elevates previously subverted aspects of the documentary genre. For example, in 1992 when she reworked daguerreotypes of Saartje Bartman, the Hottentot Venus from Harvard University’s Peabody Museum of Natural History, she photographed, enlarged, and sometimes reversed the daguerreotypes to reposition them as “creators and sustainers of a powerful and unique black diasporic culture rather than as visual evidence of African anatomical difference.” Collins comments that this type of work does not erase the imprint of the repressive institutions that used and continue to use black bodies as evidence of

---

30 In Weems’s Kitchen Table series, which will be discussed in detail in chapter three of this thesis, half of the wooden table is cropped out of the picture. The technique places the viewer at the other (unseen) end of the table, inviting him or her into the scene, reinforcing the active role of the spectator. See Chapter Three: Carrie Mae Weems and The Multitude of the African-American Female Being in the Untitled: Kitchen Table series (1990).
difference and inferiority; instead, their photographs make plain the repression and challenge viewers to reflect on this legacy in our present.\textsuperscript{32}

In this way, African-American female artists such as Weems adhere to postmodernism’s quest to undermine the notion of absolute authenticity. Moreover, both Weems and Simpson fulfill Benjamin’s prophecy regarding the status of the artist.\textsuperscript{33} Simpson’s concession to the implications of an autobiographical element within her work, along with Weems’s placement of herself as the central figure of the \textit{Kitchen Table} series, asserts an intentional action within these artists’ respective works. Simpson once stated that she wanted viewers to realize that her elision of the subject’s countenance is one of the mechanisms with which they must work in their reading of a photograph: “If they think, ‘How am I supposed to read this, if I don’t see the face?’ they may realize that they are making a cultural reading that has been learned over the years, and then perhaps see that it is not a given.”\textsuperscript{34} Weems also subverts ideas about what is “a given” in the reading of images; however, rather than excluding the face of her subject(s) in the \textit{Kitchen Table} series, she frequently places them staring directly at what would be eye-level with the viewer.

\textsuperscript{31} Collins, 22.
\textsuperscript{32} Ibid, 23.
\textsuperscript{33} At the beginning of “Art in Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” Benjamin comments about how the mass dissemination of replicated images would change the status of the artist. Though detailed discussion of representation in film falls outside the scope of this investigation, it is noteworthy that one of the reasons this Benjamin essay remains highly regarded and relevant in late twentieth-century society is the fact that he discusses film as part of the continuum of artistic media decades before it had officially entered into the art-historical critical discourse.
\textsuperscript{34} Fairbrother interview with Simpson, 178.
Both artists use what art critic Lenore Malen refers to as ‘the archetypal black woman’ in each of their works of the late 1980s and early 1990s. However, rather than positing romanticized or mythologized visions of the African-American woman, these artists offer their viewers something more realistic, more progressive, and ultimately more threatening: the depiction of African-American women as real human beings, complete with the intellect, emotion, desire and multiplicity that has been historically accorded to white society.\textsuperscript{35}

Unlike Benjamin in his influential essay, Weems and Simpson do not fear mechanical reproduction; instead they see it as opening up new possibilities. Their work poses central questions about the nature of representation and makes a commentary on the work of others. Their works are original in that they question the historical practices of photography as scientific depiction.

The works of these artists analyze, expose, and interrupt a violent visual legacy that has been in place since the first half of the nineteenth century, and their bold aesthetic interventions implore us, as viewers, to change the course of this still visible history in the twenty-first century through a consideration of the assumptions made not only by scientists and society, but also by contemporary art.\textsuperscript{36} One way in which artists combat the historical violations committed against the black female body is through the incorporation of objects and themes that allude

\textsuperscript{35} This trend is not exclusive to African-American women; other nonwhite (and white) women have successfully contested the subjugated status of women as objects of the male (viewer’s) eye. Given the scope of this project, though, these contestations will not be examined further.

\textsuperscript{36} Ibid, 28.
to the rich cultural history of Africans and diasporic African peoples. Sculptors such as Alison Saar and Renee Stout use the black body in combination with elements of folk history in order to assert the traditions of the Black Atlantic world that have been neglected by mainstream arbiters of taste despite the survival of these traditions over the last four hundred years.

In a re-presentation of the black body, these artists take the notions of sexual availability and violation and turn them upside down. In Saar’s untitled black female nude, the subject undermines the artistic tradition of portraying the African-American body. This woman seems to have a proud awareness of herself. This image contrasts with the ashamed, downcast faces of the black nudes of the nineteenth century, as well as the fully covered, kneeling “Caucasianized” blacks of Edmonia Lewis’s sculpture.37

Through the examples of these women and the rich and diverse history of photography, one witnesses the ideas of postmodernism at work and begins to understand where Simpson and Weems fit into the late twentieth-century re-presentation of the African-American female; “both employ the physically and emotionally segmented image of the black female as a site of cultural exploitation as well as that of the potential for radical self definition.”38 These women artists create

---

37 Edmonia Lewis was the first African-American artist to depict an emancipated slave. With one arm placed behind her head and the other across her abdomen, Saar’s woman at once exposes and protects herself. The woman of Saar’s work is both ethereal and rooted in the earth by her legs, which transform into roots, anchoring her into the gaze of the viewer. Saar also combines text with her image. This juxtaposition demands an intellectual awareness on the part of the viewer that the near-lifesize statue could probably not exist on its own.

38 Hixson, 24.
works that assert that authenticity and originality do not exist as pure and unblemished entities; furthermore, they press the observer to delve further into the deep and complex meanings within works that are grounded not only in the biased history of the past, but also in the ever-evolving technology of the present and future. For these African-American female artists, postmodernism represents an opportunity to reappropriate and reclaim their bodies from the gaze of a dominant society. They are thus able to elevate those who have been degraded for so long, as well assert the multifaceted and complex position that they occupy not only in society but in the art world as well.
THE POLYSEMOUS WORK OF LORNA SIMPSON

Brought to France in 1810 and put on display as a spectacle, Saartje Bartman, "The Hottentot Venus," won her fame as a sexual object, and her combination of supposed bestiality and lascivious fascination focused the attention of men who could thus obtain both vicarious pleasure and a smug reassurance of superiority. Upon her death, her genitals were dissected and preserved in a jar in the permanent collection of Paris’s Musée de l’Homme.1

This excerpt provides an account of the objectification and commodification of a black African woman in the early nineteenth century. Such events, as well as fictional and other nonfictional representations of black women as things rather than as people, have amounted to a denial of these women’s visibility in society. In *Invisibility Blues*, Michele Wallace points out that "unlike white women, who occupy the place of complementarity vis-à-vis white men in the white patriarchichal structure, or black men, who are positioned as ‘other,’ black women are relegated to the doubly negated status of being the ‘other of the other’". Lorna Simpson focuses on the construction of meaning and value, and how these systems are generated out of the relationship with the artist, viewer, and object, placing her work within the realm of philosophical questioning that has been central to conceptual art for decades. In "Uncanny Dissonance," Coco Fusco comments that Simpson juxtaposes text and image to unseat the photograph’s apparent iconic stability, (referent=image=text/caption), her photographs situate her within postmodernism’s

exploration of photography’s social functions and political implications. “Within that field of inquiry, she centers her work on how racial and sexual identity are shaped.”

Through an exploration into the historical representation of African and African-American woman, and an investigation of selected works from Simpson’s photography during 1986-1990, one witnesses the simultaneous development of the African-American woman as an independent entity, full of a strength, pride, sensuality, and knowledge distinct from the colonial ideal along with a critique of contemporaneous art issues. In Simpson’s work, particularly those works investigated in this chapter, the interplay of visual and literary information, the deconstruction of everyday language, and the reappropriation of the black female body through her refusal to meet the viewer’s gaze, along with a creative mixture of biographic and autobiographic information serve as a step toward the reclamation of the social and cultural history of African-American women at the end of twentieth century.

By the end of her undergraduate studies at the School of Visual Arts in New York City, Simpson had become weary of the limited and exploitative aspects of documentary photography and moved away from straightforward documentary format to a more phototextual style in which she creates images juxtaposed with a series of words or phrases that function as a narrative. Simpson’s first phototext, “Untitled: Irene,” (pronounced E-re-nay) was exhibited in 1979, “showing a dress

---

with inspection tags placed all over it, but the tags told a story about the life of the dress's owner."3 This multimedia work comments upon many aspects of modern urban life for working-class African-American women. Irene's life story hangs wearily from a wooden hanger, just as these women must wear the skin given to them day in and day out. The text on the dress chronicles the artist's visit to a presumably white household in which Irene worked. An excerpt from the dress's text that follows Simpson's description of the maid following a sexual assault resonates the metaphoric stature of the dress: "Between our silences we knew what had happened: our skin considered 'exotic,' targeted for brutal fantasies in cultures that interpret us as an orifice to be filled with nightmare..."4 The interplay of words and images in Simpson's phototexts began to challenge the viewer's understanding in a way that captured the interest of galleries and museums worldwide.

Simpson's work addresses the historical construction of black female subjectivity.5 Using the contrast of the colors black and white, and such common racial signifiers like hair and skin, as well as plays on language, she re-presents the African-American female through her "archetypal Black woman." Influenced by the

---

2 Loma Simpson (with Irene and Rejendra). Untitled, 1982. From Heresies: A Feminist Publication of Art and Politics: #15 "Racism is The Issue," 27. Though Heresies Untitled dates as 1982, Simpson informed meduring our telephone conversation in March 1998 that the work was produced in 1979. Irene, or Untitled, 182 was first exhibited in "Working Women Working Artists Working Together," at Gallery 1199 of the Hospital and Health Workers Union, New York City. All images can be found in Appendix I.
emergence of Conceptual art in the early eighties, Simpson reconstructs the black female body through the effacing of the identity of her model.\(^6\) Whereas other feminist artists, such as Hannah Wilke, Cindy Sherman and Carrie Mae Weems, place themselves in their respective works, Simpson shrouds her works in anonymity.\(^7\)

Like African-American contemporary Carrie Mae Weems, Simpson uses large format photography.\(^8\) Haun Sassy comments that the scale of the representative archetypal woman in Simpson’s works as more than a prosaic figure in a landscape. “She is the landscape.”\(^9\) Saussy goes on to asserts that although plenty of artists exploit the gap between an image and the text that is supposed to account for the image, explaining it and instigating action, such as the work of Barbara Kruger, Simpson’s work is distinctive in its ability to contest the rationality of the Western society pejorative traditions in the portrayal of the African-American, particularly African-American women.\(^10\)

---


\(^6\) In "Lorna Simpson: Walking the Thin Line," Kellie Jones comments that "Simpson started out as a painter but turned to photography as a quicker means to get to art's conceptual core." Simpson's close attention to formal aspects of her phototextual works are analogous with the concepts that distinguish conceptualism in modern art.

\(^7\) In “Self- and Selfless Portraits,” Elizabeth Hess states that “Simpson turns anonymity into a weapon. The figure, a young black woman in a nondescript outfit, is theatrically posed in front of a black background; the model is used more as an icon than a character. See the Village Voice, September 26, 1989.

\(^8\) However, unlike Weems, Simpson generally uses a single African-American female (not herself) as the model in her works. Although Weems has been known to produce photographs of varying sizes, she used large format photography in the Untitled (Kitchen Table) series, creating fourteen square works, each measuring 27 1/4 inches by 27 1/4 inches.


\(^10\) Saussy 84. Also, it is important to note that Simpson has dealt with the portrayal of African-American men (i.e. the work Gestures/Reenactments). However, given the scope of this project, this work will not be discussed.
In *Screen 1*, 1986, (fig. 2) Simpson uses a black room-screen in her work, literally displaying the work and blocking it at the same time. The three-part screen shows the legs of a seated black woman in nearly identical poses—except for the boat that appears at right—and under the photographs, we see the words “Marie said that she was from Montreal although” appear. Only by moving to the opposite side of the screen can we complete the sentence on the front with “she was from Haiti.” No pictures appear on the back side of the screen, perhaps indicting the absence of personhood often attributed by White Westerners to people from the Third World.

Simpson plays on the still-active notions of First World superiority, challenging her viewers to get to the truth about Marie and possibly why “Marie” would lie about her ethnic extraction. Moreover, she suggests the denial of self in which the black female depicted engages in order to make herself acceptable to (White) mainstream society. As a francophone province in Canada, Montreal represents a foreign, though still White (or whitewashed) origin. A marker of respectability, Montreals connotes something different from Haiti, the first Black country. Known for its strong African ties, and associated with vodun (or voodoo), a religion that calls on good and bad magic as well as quasi-Christian spirits/saints, Haiti represents rebellion and nonconformity—two things with which Marie does not want to be associated. Despite the fact that both Montreal and Haiti have large
French-speaking cultures, the blackness of one connotes savageness in relation to the civilized white one.

Although denial plays a compunctionary role in *Screen 1*, it is reappropriated in *Waterbearer*, 1986. Rather than hanging her head, the way one might imagine "Marie" bowing hers, this woman stands with her back to her viewers. In her hands she carries water containers. One is made of silver, while the other is made of plastic. The two materials can be seen as symbols of past and present as well as upper and lower class. Most importantly, the two containers are different vessels that serve the same function as receptacles and providers of the essence of human life. Wearing the ubiquitous shapeless white dress, the woman’s body becomes as unavailable to the viewers as her face, which looks into the black background of the scene. Simpson juxtaposes the phrases “She saw him by the river/ They asked her to tell what happened/ Only to discount her memory,” leaving the viewer to invent the story of this woman.

Simpson’s work often engages in a three-way dialogue between “viewer, artist and model. Words lead us deeper into the identity of the enigmatic figure...” However, looking at the composition of *Waterbearer*, one realizes that this work functions on many planes. The shift dress itself functions to reduce temporal specificity; it is an article of clothing that could as well be worn in the nineteenth as in the twentieth century.\(^{11}\) Against the black background and the woman’s dark skin,

\(^{11}\) Ibid., 307.
the dress emphasizes the contrast between whiteness and blackness. Thematically, the contrast shows the dichotomy of “whiteness” and “blackness” that remains an issue of interest to Simpson, as well as contemporary culture.

The water vessels in Waterbearer connect the quiet grace of this phototextual work to the Dutch artist Jan Vermeer’s Waterjug portraits painted during the late seventeenth century. Like Simpson’s piece, the subjects of Vermeer’s works were often depicted disregarding the viewer’s gaze, as if concentrated upon some greater entity. Vermeer often chose to paint female servants, imbuing his women with a quiet majesty that Vermeer felt was quintessentially Dutch. Executed in a near-photorealist manner, Vermeer’s portraits stand as masterpieces not only of technique but also of emotional intensity within Western art. By adopting Vermeer-like qualities in her work, Simpson asserts a grandness and significance for the individual subject of her piece and for the larger subject her Waterbearer represents—the black female.

The work counters the overwhelmingly racist and sexist depictions of African-American women that remain prevalent in art and society. bell hooks remarks in “Facing Difference: The Black Female Body” that “in [Waterbearer] the keeper of history, the griot, the one who bears water as life and blessing, is a black woman.” According to hooks, this figure continues to assert that, despite the fact

---

12 I am not asserting an intentional use of Dutch devices in Simpson’s work. Though different in terms of time, location and ethnicity, Dutch and African-American art share in similar notions of ethnic specificity that are arguably universal. Dutch portraits often made use of props to reinforce
that she has been refused the position of authority and voice that would allow her to be a subject in history, she stands defiantly. By turning her back on those who cannot hear subjugated knowledge, the model creates, through her own gaze, an alternative space where she is both self-defining and self-determining.  

_Waterbearer_ also speaks of the art-historical and spiritual foundation upon which Simpson stands and creates. Reminiscent of the working-class _Waterbearers_ of Vermeer, Simpson’s _Waterbearer_ conjures up the universal and timeless similarities that appear in seventeenth-century Dutch and twentieth-century African-American art. Moreover, the phototext asserts the possibility of self-renewal and perpetuation. The water flows like a blessing. Despite the changes, distortions, and misinformation symbolized by its containers, the water will continue to sustain and nurture life... It is the water that allows the black female figure to reclaim a place in history.

To assert that Simpson uses her work to illustrate the significance and credibility of African-Americans in art would be an overly simplistic analysis. Simpson counters the overwhelmingly racist and sexist depictions of African-

---

14 Speaking with Ms. Simpson on March 8, 1998, I learned that the “Dutch” devices used in _Waterbearer_ are, in fact, not intentional. However, she acknowledged the universality of the devices. In an interview with curator Thelma Golden, Simpson notes that “Waterbearer is about memory and disappearance.” A recurrent amenity of her work, the water container functions as a word play, pitcher vs. picture, referring to the thing and the image as well as the conjunction of the image of the ocean and that of the pitcher, a vessel or container of water.” See Thelma Golden “An Interview with Lorna Simpson,” in _Lorna Simpson: Standing in the Water_. 1994: Whitney Museum of American Art at Philip Morris.
15 Ibid., 95.
American women that remained prevalent in art and in society. In many ways, she liberates the African-American female and her body from its historic oppression. Simpson’s work critiques Western society’s dominant view of African-American women. The days in which African slaves were denied control of their procreation and their offspring have passed, yet in her very first phototext, Irene, Simpson alludes to the scrutiny and objectifying examination that many African-American women continue to undergo within today’s society. In You’re Fine, 1988, an African-American woman, dressed in a white dress, whose body has been segmented into four sections lies on her side with her back facing the camera. The parts of the body generally focused on during a physical examination are listed to the left of the image, and the words “secretarial position,” appear on the right. The strange disparity is further accentuated by the phrases “You’re Fine” and “You’re Hired,” which appear above and below the image, respectively; how does the certification of health relate to a woman’s application for a typical secretarial position? Indeed, the lists and phrases suggest a reference to the “woman as sexual-object.”16 The image refers to an actual experience: Simpson was asked to undergo a medical examination as part of an application for a secretarial position; but, more importantly, You’re Fine portrays the degrading situations that women face within the workforce.

In Untitled (2 Necklines), 1989, Simpson explores the relationship between language and violence. The cropped face, neck, and collarbone of an African-

---

16 Peter Mark during a thesis meeting.
American woman are shown in two adjacent circular frames with the words “ring, surround, lasso, noose, eye, areola, halo, cuffs, collar, and loop” listed vertically between them on formica plaques. In her essay “Excisions of the Flesh,” Saidiya V. Hartman notes that the apposition of the words and necklines suggests the “red terror” of lynching; for years, black families in the American South feared the loss of their male children and husbands to the violent hatred of white lynch mobs. Here, the beauty and sensuality of a potentially erotic part of the female body is linked to an assortment of seemingly harmless words that acquire terrifying meaning when seen in the context of the tumultuous history of Africans in the United States of America, a history marked by slavery and lynching.\(^1\) In the combination of text and image, words as innocent as “halo” and “areola” are transformed, by virtue of contiguity, into things that encircle, surround, and contain. Here Simpson uses lower-case letters for the words. This choice of type suggests the scattered nature of the story Simpson provides—however cryptically—for the viewer, almost as if it is being remembered unconsciously.\(^2\) Viewing Two Necklines, the observer is confronted with the complexity of meaning; one of the necklines could be a rope for a noose (e.g., a “neck line”). Furthermore, the viewer is faced with the phrase located

---


\(^{2}\) The use of lowercase letters recurs frequently in Simpson’s work during this period. Simpson leaves an ambiguous story. However, one cannot discern a single, absolute purpose for the technique. Perhaps, the words allude to the model’s story. “Or is another person altogether trying to recreate a series of events removed from some removed place in space and time?” Simpson’s works tend to ask more questions than they answer. Elizabeth Hess remarks in “Self- and Selfless Protraits,” that Simpson...may be formulaic, but her formula is not the least bit facile.” See Figure, 1991, description.
at the bottom of the work that beckons him or her into the intensity of the work, "feel the ground sliding from under you."

Within the work, Simpson changes the meanings usually attached to the words and circles that create the scheme of the image, thereby challenging the dominant culture’s conventional meanings. Circles, usually symbolic of eternity, or that which has neither beginning nor end, are used here to allude to the life without freedom that so many Africans experienced in the United States for hundreds of years. Simpson also engages her viewers in a play on words that alters the manner in which they, innocent or malevolent, function. As one looks at Two Necklines, the words descend into a brutal madness that recedes with the image of the depicted neck being strangled by a noose.

Juxtaposing images and text gives Simpson an opportunity to convey and challenge meaning both visually and intellectually. As can be seen in (Untitled) Two Necklines, You’re Fine, and many other works, the words that Simpson chooses to include in her pieces are central to her meaning, complementing the visual images of
the women who often pose for the pictures. At first glance, the words in the piece may seem superfluous, sometimes even irrelevant, but they are crucial to a full understanding of Simpson’s work. Words as well as images are used in the construction of culture, and, in the case of the culture Simpson is portraying, oppression. Simpson uses language in conjunction with images to challenge viewers and make them think about everyday words and phrases in a different way.

Simpson’s creative process often begins with the words and then finds its way to the complete image. In an interview with Deborah Willis, Simpson speaks of her “deconstruction of language,” stating that in her own experiences, “it’s the words, the things that are said, that stick in her mind;” she is fascinated by the inadequacy of words, or the ways in which people attempt to find the right words to relate an experience. Literature also plays a role in shaping her work:

When I was in school, I read a lot of literature that had a profound effect on me. I was really amazed by black writers like James Baldwin, Ntozake Shange, Alice Walker and Zora Neale Hurston. . . . These writers related black experiences in such interesting ways, and for them language became a slippery object. I was really amazed by how much they said in silence. Their work helped me to take a hard look at a language—the way it functions and the way we use it.20

Simpson takes the evocative quality of language and invites her “readers” to do the same. Aware of the distinct individual visual experiences that people have, Simpson, like her literary influences, shapes her phototexts in ways that leave an indelible mark on her viewers. We view thousands of photographs a day, through

---

19 In my conversation with the artist on March 8, 1998, I learned that she creates the phrases that are used in conjunction with her photographs.
20 Interview with artist, 56.
magazines, or photocopies. Each of these reproductions carries a distinct meaning, and Simpson asserts that the meanings are vast and deep.

In *Necklines*, Simpson uses compound words that include the word “neck” along with three shots of a black woman’s neck. Some of the words, such as “necklace,” “necktie,” and “necking” are used in everyday speech, while others like “breakneck,” “neck & neck,” and “neck-ed” are either phrases or colloquialisms used by specific segments of the population. All of the words that Simpson uses have to do with the neck, but each one carries a specific meaning, or no meaning at all. In seeing *Necklines*, the viewer is asked to think about the neck: the woman’s neck, the necks of the lynched, and one’s own neck. In daily life, words connote many things, both positive and negative. A word such as ‘black’ is used to describe hue, as well as skin color. When used to describe people of African descent, the word is often convoluted into something more derogatory.

Simpson engages in a game that points out the power relationships behind the attribution of meaning to words. Saidiya Hartman remarks that Simpson’s work is reminiscent of Wittgenstein’s theory of language. In his *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein concludes that the utilization and application of language, rather than its depictive capacity, determines meaning. Wittgenstein employed the term “language game” to “emphasize the role of rule-governed human activities in constituting the basic representative relationships between language and reality.” Wittgenstein suggests that all use of language occurs in a public context, and
that the word acquires meaning in a specific situation and under certain circumstances.\textsuperscript{21}

Simpson emphasizes how language can be used as a means of ensuring the domination exercised over individuals in society. Hartman suggests that Simpson’s language games act as an index to the networks of power in which words and images acquire meaning and the words elucidate what may be have remained unclear in the visual. The social instrumentality of language and the discourses that comprise the visual are the focus of Simpson’s investigations. The emphasis on rules and on the relations of power that govern language does not preclude a consideration of the polyvalence of language. What Simpson challenges within her work are the assumptions that viewers make about the meaning of words; Simpson uncovers the ambiguity of everyday meaning.\textsuperscript{22} Thus, Simpson asserts that knowledge is power. Moreover, knowledge (of discriminations) is power (to affix labels). Saussy asserts that “it is no accident if the viewer is led to see Simpson’s satire on the discriminative departments of knowledge (e.g. medicine) as an accusation of its too-easy compact with discrimination in the economic or racial sense.”\textsuperscript{23}

The multiple layers that Simpson embeds in her work reveal the various injustices perpetuated against African-Americans, particularly against African-American women. Historically depicted as wanton, overbearing creatures in literature and the media, African-American women are often disregarded, even

\textsuperscript{21} Wittgenstein, Philosophical Investigations and Hartman “Excisions of the Flesh,” 60.
discounted in the name of preserving a socioeconomic, as well as an ethnic, hierarchy. In *Three Seated Figures*, 1989, three images of an African-American woman seated, with her head cropped out of the photograph, are bordered by the words “her story” on the left, and “each time they looked for proof” on the right. Above the pictures, the words “Prints,” “Signs of Entry,” and “Marks,” appear respectively. Dressed in a simple, white shift dress, the woman does not appear to have been victimized in any way. *Three Seated Figures* reminds the viewer that the victim of sexual assault is only as good as the physical evidence that she can provide. Although the absence of a mouth is characteristic of Simpson’s phototexts, here it refers to the stifled voice of the victim and its insignificance in the legal process of criminal prosecution. What can the voice of this—African-American—victim contribute to a “invisible” crime? Hartman asserts that the subjection of the body to observation in *Three Seated Figures* is a means by which the figure is degraded. Visibility is the foundation of power; without the evidence of abuse, the woman is rendered powerless. Indeed, the figure is compartmentalized into the frames of the piece and left unresolved, as many crimes against women are left in police files. The absence of the eyes and head of the subject imply an elision of her consciousness and her soul. *Three Seated Figures* alludes to the crime against African-American women that cannot be seen through the naked eye. Centuries of degradation and dehumanization sit silently within the African diasporic woman. Here, Simpson’s cropping out of the most

---

22 Ibid., 60.
blatant indicator of emotion—the face—complements her notion of identity about the archetypal African-American woman.

By virtue of the fact that she is the image's creator, Lorna Simpson also represents a reclamation of both social and cultural history by African-American women. Within the multi-layered, complex visual, literal, and textual imagery, Simpson presents a challenge to dominant, racialized structures that deny African-Americans, as well as other minority groups, their place in art, and in society. Interestingly, this occurrence within Simpson's art parallels, yet maintains a certain distinction to, the discourse that took place in the catalogue of "The Black Male: Representations of Masculinity in Contemporary American Art," at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 1994-95. In his essay "Black Masculinity and Visual Culture," Herman Gray states that "contemporary images of masculinity continue to challenge hegemonic constructions of whiteness even as they rewrite and reproduce forms of patriarchal authority, enveloping some of its most disturbing aspects in black vernacular style and expressive performance."25

In challenging the dominant male constructions of female blackness, Simpson alludes to some of the horrific realities that are a part of the racial history of the United States, as can be seen in Two Necklines. In the case of rap culture, aspects of rage, fear, and black patriarchal domination are employed to capitalize on the fear that has been disseminated to the masses. By means of visual subtleties, Simpson

23 Saussy, 84.
covertly challenges viewer’s perceptions of the black female body and engages them visually in contrast to the overt visualization used in the “Black Male” exhibition.\textsuperscript{26} 

By the late 1980s, Simpson turns to a more blantant ethnicity indicator, hair. By itself, hair has been used as the universal differentiation of the races, and one of the instruments through which an oppressive hierarchy is perpetuated: long, soft and silky (white) hair being superior to short, coarse, and kinky (black) hair. She bridges the gap between past and present by focusing upon racial signifiers that have been used historically to perpetuate a hierarchy of difference. Kobena Mercer remarks in “Black Hair/Style Politics” that “within racism’s bipolar codification of human values, black people’s hair has been historically devalued as the most visible sign of blackness, second only to skin”.\textsuperscript{27} Similarly, for Simpson, hair functions as a discursive prop because of its heavy-laden cultural and historic meanings and its physical qualities. 

According to Kobena Mercer, African-Americans have appropriated and counter-appropriated various white and “natural” hair styles throughout the twentieth century as a demonstration of insubordination and also as a way of further differentiating themselves from the white hegemonic norm. However, he also asserts 

\textsuperscript{24} Ibid., 60. 
\textsuperscript{25} Herman Gray, “Black Masculinity and Visual culture”, 176. 
\textsuperscript{26} Where the Black Male exhibition utilized aggressive images of African-American men as it posed questions regarding the representations of the “Black Male” in American art, Simpson uses a more innocuous, and less scathing technique to present her ideas about the identity of the archetypal “Black woman.” Interestingly, one of Simpson’s earlier works Gestures/Reenactments, a series that depicts multiple stores of black men whose heads have been cropped out the the picture was included in the exhibition.
that counter-hegemonic hairstyles such the "Afro" and dreadlocks are romanticized
derivations of a mythologized Africa. Their logic seems similar to that of white sub-
culture groups such as the beats of the 1950s or the long-haired hippies of the 1960s:
"the limitations underline the diasporic specificity of the Afro and Dreadlocks and
ask us to examine, first, the conditions of commodification and, second, the question
of the ‘imaginary’ relationship of [African-American and Afro-Caribbean peoples] to
Africa and African cultures as such."\textsuperscript{28}

Furthermore, the similarities between black hairstyles of the mid-twentieth
century and other “counter-cultural” hairstyles of the same period suggest that
however strategically and historically important these hairstyles were, such tactics of
reversal remain stable and contradictory because their assertion of difference often
hinges on what is only the inversion of ‘sameness’.\textsuperscript{29} During the 1960s, the long hair
of ‘hippies’ and big, kinky Jewish hairdos were imitations of the Afro as symbols of
rebellion against the mainstream and pride in distinct ethnic heritage, respectively.\textsuperscript{30}
Thus, as a signifier of race, hair coincides with Simpson’s challenge to the viewer to
question what they accept as ‘natural.’ As one looks at Simpson’s hairworks like
\textit{Stereo Styles}, 1988, \textit{Same} and \textit{Flipside}, 1991, one sees that perhaps other
\textsuperscript{27} Kobena Mercer. 1990. “Black Hair/Style Politics,” in \textit{Out There: Marginalization and
Contemporary Culture}. ed. Russell Ferguson et al. (New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art),
256.
\textsuperscript{28} Ibid., 255.
\textsuperscript{29} Ibid., 257.
\textsuperscript{30} Krishna Winston, editorial comments. The big, kinky hairstyles worn by many Jews during the
1960s were sometimes referred to as ‘Jewfros’. 

42
constructions, such as the hierarchy of races, are also not as natural as they may
appear to be.

In *Stereo Styles*, 1988, one sees how Simpson plays with hair as a symbol and
a prop. For ten photographs of black women with different hairstyles, Simpson
includes ten adjectives or phrases that seem to describe them. The hairdos range
from neatly coiffed to regular to slightly in disarray to disheveled. In viewing the
photographs and the words together, one realizes that the words do not necessary
coincide with the each of the pictures. Which one is supposed to be “sweet?” Is the
second photograph on the upper right supposed to be “silly” or “country fresh?”
Which hairstyle is “boyish?” In an interview with Deborah Willis, Simpson
comments that *Stereo Styles* is a piece that deals with the assumptions and
stereotypes related to a woman’s appearance, particularly that of black women. The
way you wear your hair is supposed to say something about you, which is basically
bull.... Simpson’s emphatic denunciation of the stereotypes related to black
women in *Stereo Styles* can be extended to describe her position regarding African-
American female identity in her work of this period.

For years, Simpson has continued to address the stupidity of the
assumptions made about a woman based on her hairstyle, as can be seen in *Flipside*,
1991. Composed of two photographs and a sentence that appears below the
pictures, this work comments on the complex, polemical issues that attach to hair as

---

31 Willis interview, 58.
a signifier. In the left photograph, a woman is portrayed from the back; her shoulder blades are visible inside the wide, square neckline of her black dress. The nape of her neck is also left visible because of her shortly-cropped hair. The sentence that appears under the photographs, “the neighbors were suspicious of her hairstyle,” indicates the connotations implicit for society in the short hairstyle. Hair continues to serve as a prop in the right photograph of *Flipside*. Here, a mask is shown with the inside facing the viewer. The mask is reminiscent of the ‘Flip,’ a European hairstyle in which the ends of the hair are curled upward. This hairstyle was popular during the 1960s, particularly among African-American female singers.32

However, the fact that this European hairstyle echoes an African mask suggests interesting questions about appropriation. Evidence of European appropriation of African artifacts can be seen within art. African, or formerly “primitive,” art has been appropriated and exploited by Europeans since Africa was colonized. Artists such as Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque, the founders of Cubism, emulated African color schemes and angularity in their respective works. They viewed “primitive” art as formally interesting, but failed to contextualize the works culturally.

32 *In Focus: Five Women Photographers*, Sylvia Wolf writes that "Flipside comes from an event in [Simpson's] childhood. When [Simpson] was about ten years old, her mother began to wear her hair in an Afro...In the 1960s, the Afro became a symbol of the political struggle for equal rights and political power. At the time, Simpson lived her family in a working-class black community in Queens, New York. To the neighbors, Simpson's mother's Afro was a political statement. It looked radical...."
Simpson hides her subject’s face, forcing the viewer to discern the phototext’s meaning from the image without the aide of the woman’s countenance. The work tells us that neighbors are suspicious of the subject’s hairstyle. However, the statement reads more as a narrative than a fact known by the woman, reminiscent of the low voices used when rumors are spread. Turned, on the right, the mask in *Flipside* invites us to participate in the work as a player. Interestingly, the nature of the role played remains open-ended. As viewers, our role is left ambiguous; ultimately, we decide whether we view the work as the colonizers once viewed African art, as neighbors, whispering behind the woman’s neck, or as a new, uncategorized viewer—neither black nor white—, seeing out of the mask for the first time?33

Beryl Wright asserts that “as an icon of ethnicity, [the mask] has become a symbol of the racial and cultural differences that separate African from Western society, as well as a material object against which African-Americans can reflect upon their relationship to an obscured cultural past. For those living in the gap between two cultures, the valuation of the mask as both cultural artifact and pure art form has established it as a standard against which contemporary culture can be judged.”34 Simpson’s *Flipside* does not function as a critique of Western and popular society;

---

33 Guillermo E. Brown’s Wesleyan Senior Honors Thesis in Music, *Masked/Unmasked*, makes an interesting commentary about masks and the function of music samples as the disguise and purveyor of recognized sound. In the same way, Simpson’s uses West African masks in selected work as a disguise as well as purveyor of (diasporic) meaning and commentary in Western art.

rather the phototext offers a reflection on social realities that separate the generic figure on the left from the primary icon of historical ethnicity and cultural practice on the right.  

Hair continues to be a historical and cultural signifier in Same, 1991. Consisting of sixteen photographs in which two women are connected to each other by a braid of hair that extends across four panels, this work asserts the strength and timelessness of the signifier. Between each row of photographs, blocks are inserted with the phrases “they pronounced water the same way/ were disliked for the same reasons/ they pronounced machete the same way”, “read w/ the same accent/ were not related/ worked for the same pay/ read the news account and knew it could easily have been them”, “knew illness/ didn’t wear their hair the same way/ were let go for the same reason/ had never met”. The women shown appear to be almost identical, except that the woman on the left wears a white tee-shirt, while the woman on the right is topless.

Literally connected by the long braid, these women are also connected by the experiences alluded to in the phrase blocks. The similarities that these women share in their speech and daily struggles are much the same as the collective experience of outsider groups within a dominant culture, specifically for African-Americans. Furthermore, these women are connected through time and space. Simpson could be

35 Ibid., 22.
36 The fact that the model on the left side appears topless perhaps connotes the timelessness of the archetypal black woman. Timelessness implies a transcendence of fashion and other societal constructs that might both impede Simpson’s ideas and mislead the viewer.
speaking about two women living in different cities or countries or she could be speaking of two women living in different decades, perhaps centuries. In *Same*, the struggles and injustices that “other” peoples experience transcend the boundaries of time. Whereas *Flipside* uses hair to comment on the questionable direction of appropriation in hairstyles, *Same* uses hair elegantly to connect these African-American women with a signifier that has been used historically to dehumanize both of them.37

In looking at the works focusing on hair, one may be reminded of the conk, a hairstyle popular in the 1940s among blacks, which involved a painful straightening by applying hot lye, or sodium hydroxide. The results was smooth, less kinky hair that could be oiled, slicked, and coiffed into various styles that were popular among street hustlers. In “Black Hair/Style Politics,” Mercer recontextualizes the style that Malcolm X called his “first really big step towards self-degradation,” asserting that the conk, like other African-Americanisms like ‘signifying’ and *ebonics*, operates as a subversion of oppression. Style encoded political messages to those in the know that were unintelligible to white society by virtue of the ambiguous use of common words in the English language. In fact, the conk suggests a covert logic of cultural

---

37 A collaboration with her “alter-ego,” performance artist, actress and Simpson’s recurrent model, Alva Rogers, *Same* appeared as part of a piece in the Spoleto Art Festival in Charlotte, NC. A recollection of the Middle Passage, the installation included the image, along with large vessels of water labeled with Formica plaques that had the names of slaves ships engraved upon them.
struggle operating in and against hegemonic cultural codes, a logic quite different from
the overt oppositionality of the naturalistic Afro or Dreadlocks.38

Using, or refusing to use, the signifiers of the African-American female body
(i.e., sexuality or matriarchy), Simpson asserts a vision of woman that no longer
adheres to the strict binary oppositions that maintain a matrix of domination.39 For
example, she refrains from using the naked female body. In Proofreading, 1989, (not
pictured) Simpson contests the notion of African-American female availability and
lasciviousness, even as she uses it in the piece. In the work, four women’s faces are
covered with plaques that have the coded message, M-I, X-Y, R-U, B-Z? written on
them. Here, Simpson parses language down to a syllabic scale; the message reads
“Am I sexy, Are you busy?” The faces read like an open book; however, they fail to
be an object of desire because the markers of beauty are completely covered. Their
faces have been hidden from view, as have their bodies, which have been cropped out
of the photograph. In describing Proofreading, Simpson states:

The text basically reads, ‘Am I sexy, are you busy?’ But it reads so in an
abbreviated, phonetic manner. Letters stand for the phonetic sounds to complete
each word. The images, the faces, are cut out and those words replace the faces.
This time I do take from advertising images of women: what they’re selling
conveys that line. But it’s a line that’s applied to a mask. The person posing and
her expression reveals a mask and the process of serving up the mask. In terms of
sexuality, we’re oriented toward what we are forced to regard as sexy or sensual.
The thinking is based on facade and fallacy and doesn’t really deal too much with
sexuality in the individual. Proofreading deals with headshots or photographs of
individuals and the way people read images on this psychological level. It’s about
how their eyes look inviting. I wanted to eliminate all of that information from the
image, but leave the come-on, the enticement, albeit twisted.40

---

38 Mercer, 259-60.
39 Patricia Hill Collins. “Black Feminist Thought on The Matrix of Domination”.
40 Taken from Willis’s interview with the artist, 10.
Simpson’s juxtaposition of a more societal perspective and a distinct African-American one with her own is a recurrent characteristic in her work. Much of Simpson’s work employs an African-American strategy known as “signifying.” Creating another word play, signifying versus signifier, Simpson elevates the vernacular practice in such a way that it becomes a crucial component of much of her work during this period. In her essay for the Matrix/Berkeley 135 exhibition at the University Art Museum at the University of California at Berkeley, Yasmin Ramirez Harwood notes that:

Signifying is a language game that obliges the participant to arrive at a conclusion about the meaning of a word or phrase through conjecture. The superior player, however, will not be content to correctly guess what his or her opponent’s intended meaning is. Instead, the object of the game is to trump one’s opponent by turning a phrase sound to mean something entirely different. This form of word play, which is striking similar to Jacques Derrida’s notion of language as an interplay of differences and deferrals, has a serious intent. Once known as the “slaves trope,” signifying is often employed to undermine pretense or to reverse someone’s opinion about one’s own status.\footnote{Harwood goes onto note that works such as Necklines and You’re Fine engage in signifying rituals. See \textit{Matrix 135} booklet, University Art Museum: early May-early July 1990.}

Simpson’s formulaic and “cipherlike” images and signs create a sometimes unnerving commentary and vision that actively reconstructs the African-American female body.\footnote{See Brian Wallis. “Questioning Documentary,” 61.} Speaking on many levels, Simpson uses complex, though not “secretive” word games to assert her artistic vision.\footnote{Harwood, 1.} Through her closely cropped and detached format, Simpson challenges her viewer to infer the meaning of works that do not offer answers as much as they propose more questions for the postmodern dialectic of the late eighties and early nineties. In 1988, Lenore Malen wrote that Lorna Simpson’s
work, an example of the guarded relationship of young artists with the art world, may be a preview of the 1990s. Looking at Simpson’s work as we near the close of the 1990s, it becomes obvious that Malen’s words proved themselves to be true. As a purveyor of “unexamined cultural attitudes,” Lorna Simpson presents her audience, an increasingly large audience that includes men and women from diverse backgrounds, with a polysemous reconstruction of the African-American female that reappropriates the language, imagery, and tradition that had once been either used or held against diasporic Africans in the United States.

---

45 In my conversation with Ms. Simpson, she stated that although her work calls upon the theoretical postmodern discourse concerning identity and representation, it does not directly respond to the dialectic.
CARRIE MAE WEEMS AND THE MULTITUDE OF THE AFRICAN-AMERICAN FEMALE

BEING IN THE UNTITLED: KITCHEN TABLE SERIES (1990)

As the quintessential realist medium of the postmodern age, photography has served many artists for the dissemination and realization of their ideas. For women artists, photography has become a means through which they are now able to confront, appropriate, and re-present ideas of identity. For photographer Carrie Mae Weems, the camera functions as a soothsayer for African-Americans. Using historically pejorative idioms, Weems is able to shed light upon the ways in which African-Americans have been wronged and disregarded in both American history and art history. Looking particularly at Weems's Kitchen Table series, one discovers the stable, grounded way in which Weems chooses to confront the viewer and, in a larger sense, the (white) mainstream, as she affirms qualities in her subjects that have been previously portrayed negatively by critics and audiences.

Within much of Weems's work, she subverts stereotypes about race, as well as gender. Her art balances rich and universal themes with the specifics of personal, cultural, and national histories. Often mixing hard realities with a personal vision, some of her works are pointedly political, bitter with the pain of past injustices and still prevalent prejudices, while other work is playful and even celebratory.¹ Weems portrays African-Americans in a way that reflects their triumphant and tumultuous history.

For example, in the *Colored People* series of 1989-90, one recognizes the overt commentary on color-consciousness; however, one also sees how Weems succeeds in undermining the hierarchy of skin color that has plagued African-Americans since slavery. Looking at *Blue Black Boy* and *Honey Colored Boy*, one notices the differences in skin tone of the two boys. In looking closely, one realizes that Weems contests notions of color consciousness in this series in relation to the ascription of status as well as the historic association of negative qualities with people of African descent. The titles of the works, like those mentioned above, refer to the titles given to members of the African-American community based upon skin color. Andrea Kirsh remarks that the format of the *Colored People* series alludes to the nineteenth-century use of photography in eugenics and criminology that, not so coincidentally, led to the modern “mug shot.” However, she appropriates the “mug shot” sequence of front and side view (a practice also used in anthropology to capture the “primitive other”) and turns it into a repetition of affirmation. Here Weems also appropriates these titles in her pun upon the usage of such names, and employs them in her critique of the practice. The prints have literally been washed in Crayola crayon-type (aniline dye) interpretations of the colors “blue black” and “honey.” The result is humorous in that people, even colored people, do not come in the hues represented in Weems’s *Colored People* series. Moreover, neither of the subjects depicted surpasses the other in terms of beauty. In seeing these works, in conjunction with other works in this

---

2 Unless otherwise indicated, all images appear in Appendix II: Carrie Mae Weems.
series, one begins to understand how Weems intentionally usurps this derogatory aspect of race-consciousness.\(^4\)

In fact, Weems’s interest in art was sparked by other African-American artists who revealed something special about the black experience, and spoke about the rich, broad spectrum of her culture. Works such as *The Sweet Flypaper of Life*, 1955, a collaboration of the photographer Roy DeCarava and the poet Langston Hughes, as well as the *Black Photographers Annual*, inspired and influenced the art that Weems would pursue as an adult. In *The Sweet Flypaper of Life*, DeCarava and Hughes chronicle the fictitious life of Sister Mary Bradley, an African-American grandmother living in Harlem. Filled with beautiful and poignant pictures, as well as a light, yet profound vernacular narrative by Bradley, *Sweet Flypaper* symbolizes a part of the African-American experience that counters society’s depiction of Harlem and its inhabitants as deteriorating and inconsequential.

Within his photography, DeCarava’s visual representations invert the dominant culture’s aesthetics which used blackness as a marker of ugliness. DeCarava endeavored to reframe the black image within a subversive politics of representation that challenged the logic of racism and degradation. His photography created images of blacks that embodied a spirit of abundance and plenty; he claimed blackness as an aesthetic space of ethereal beauty, of persistent, unsuppressed elegance and grace.\(^5\) Weems admired DeCarava’s commitment to portraying the life of his neighborhood,

---

\(^4\) Kirsh also mentions that Weems’s intentional use of children in *Colored People* functions as an affirmation to young African-Americans. She uses the title of the series and its contents as a mirror to the beauty of African diasporic color multiplicity, 17.

and was drawn to the poetry of his imagery, which reflects the beauty that he saw his subjects—his own people. For her, DeCarava’s work was monumentally significant in its ability to link humanity and blackness. Looking at Weems’s work, one can see her vision of blackness as an extension of DeCarava’s.

Like her contemporary Lorna Simpson, Weems reclaims the African-American “self” from the confines of mainstream (white) oppression. Looking at Weems’s depiction of African-American women, one sees how she combats the historical portrayals of the Black female body as sex-object or emasculating matriarch. She imbues her characters with rich depth and viable emotion that poetically capture that which society refuses to acknowledge.

Susan C. Lee notes in Re-Inscribing the Other that Weems inverts the icon of women as passive sexual object, and repositions her as sexual subject. Using a single light source and ubiquitous kitchen table, Weems chronicles the life of a woman as she finds love, has children, and lives alone. Within the series, the photographs are cropped at the middle of the table, bringing the viewer into the scene. The choice of the kitchen table is metaphoric, suggesting a woman’s space, and symbolic of the tumultuous historical and contemporary signifiers that the kitchen has. Historically, the kitchen has been the site of domestic labor by African-American women, going back to slavery times. Now, the kitchen functions as central space within many

---

9Kirsh, A. 10.
7Kirsh remarks that Weems’sFamily Pictures and Stories and Untitled: Kitchen Table pay homage to the Sweet Flypaper of Life.
8 In this examination of visual representations of the black female body, I will concentrate upon those series of Weems that deal most directly with women. However, I do not mean to deny the viability or relevance of Weems’s depiction of African-American men and children.
9 Susan C. Lee. 1996. Re-Inscribing the Other: Race and Representation in the Works of Three
households; the kitchen is the hearth of the home and the figurative womb, representing nourishment, warmth, and safety.\textsuperscript{10}

In the fourteen works that make up the \textit{Untitled: Kitchen Table} series, Weems presents an intimate look at the psychological relationships and gender politics within the contemporary American family, as played out around the \textit{Kitchen Table}.\textsuperscript{11} Using a large-format camera, Weems presents the life of African-American woman in a rich, multi-layered manner that integrates folkloric imagery and language with modern photographic conventions. In her depiction of the African-American woman, Weems combines pictures of the lone woman (Weems uses herself as the model.\textsuperscript{12}), with pictures of the woman with a man, with friends, and with children. In this way, Weems contextualizes the African-American woman in a different manner than Lorna Simpson, who primarily uses a single female subject in her work.

Using traditional African-American conventions, Weems sets the scene of the series in a single room. 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 space; by the receding table; and by the prominent verticality and

\textsuperscript{10} Lee, 23.

\textsuperscript{11} Weems's \textit{Kitchen Table} series is composed of twenty silver print images, each 27 1/4 by 27 1/4 inches, and thirteen panels of 11 by 11 inch text. Elizabeth Abel asserts that "despite its own absolutely invariant frame and camera location—all 20 images represent the identical domestic setting from a fixed position at the far end of the kitchen table." She continues, remarking upon the formal significance that Weems implies, stating that the "insistently reiterated space functions less as a figure of inviolable autonomy than a theatrical arena into which characters enter and exit, performing and reforming family roles." See Elizabeth Abel. 1997 "Domestic Borders, Cultural Boundaries: Black Feminists Re-view the Family," 16. Also, Mary Jane Jacob. 1994. introduction to \textit{Carrie Mae Weems. Fabric Workshop/Museum} and 1994 Dakar Biennial, 9-10.

\textsuperscript{12} The significance of Weems's placement of herself in series will be discussed later.
cold, geometric, elliptical shape of the overhead light. Kirsh remarks that the consistent illumination of the overhead light functions doubly as the light of an interrogation room, as well as a "metaphor for the artist's examination of the woman's life".

In the first photograph of the series, Untitled (Man and Mirror), Weems transforms the black woman as "sexual object" into "sexual being." Man and Mirror shows a robed woman seated at the far end of the kitchen while a man seductively whispers into her ear. The seduction is further implied by the accoutrements of sex—alcohol, nearly empty glasses, and cigarettes. Looking directly into the eyes of the would-be viewer, the woman in Man and Mirror boldly asserts the pleasure and sensuality she feels. Referring to feminine pleasure, the photograph illustrates a woman who delights not only in looking at herself, but also in the knowledge that she is being looked at and desired. Her eyes are inviting, yet one’s gaze seems doubly deflected by the mirror that is tilted in such a way that the reverse side shows the table, not the face of the viewer. Lee states that "Weems subverts the role of to-be looked-at-ness and focuses on signifying female desire; the desire to be a sexual being without the stereotype of the lascivious Other." She also plays with the idea of exhibitionism, as emphasized by the mirror and the figure of the man, and also the returned look of the viewer. Here, Weems undermines the construction of erotic

---

13 Nancy Princenthal compares the overhead light to the camera’s “unblinking eye” in her 1991 review of the Kitchen Table Series show at P.P.O.W. gallery. Also, in an interview with Lois Tarlow, Weems refers to a multilevel experience in which her viewers engage wherein they interact with images and read the text. See Lois Tarlow, “Profile: Carrie Mae Weems,” in Art New England August/September 1991: 9-11.
14 Kirsh, 14.
15 Lee, 24.
object, creating this African-American woman as erotic subject in possession of the
gaze, and in control of her image as a woman comfortable with her sexuality.

Within the series, recurrent props such as the *Kitchen table*, the various
accouterments, a birdcage, a tapestry and a small picture in a white frame, along with
characters and text assist in the depiction of the life of the central figure. Calvin
Reid, in his *Art Magazine* review, notes each pictorial setting resembles a stage filled
with a consistent, though shifting set of props: a wooden table that serves as coded-
yet-familiar paraphenalia of the direct, heartfelt expression associated with the safety
of home. In each photograph, the characters are either sitting or standing near the
table, as if anchored to the central space. Weems' *Kitchen Table* not only invites the
viewer into the scene but also asserts both the specificity of the black subject as well
as the universality of this story and this woman’s experience; after all, the kitchen is a
meeting place for all families, and a familiar place to women of nearly all ethnicities.
bell hooks notes that in her work, Weems consistently invites us, the viewers, to
engage the black subject in ways that call attention to the specificity of race even as
we engage an emotional landscape that challenges us to look beyond race and
recognize the multiple concerns represented.17

Formally, the cropping of the table, emphasized by the wooden strips,
accentuates its planar recession, punctuates the objects that rest upon it, and visually
pulls the viewer into the scene. Even the accouterments—the glasses, cigarettes,
ashtray, etc.—are placed with what Kirsh calls "the studied casualness of a

---
16Here, the word *text* refers to the original words and form of the written/printed work. Taken from
*Webster’s Ninth New Collegiate Thesaurus*, 1220.
seventeenth-century Dutch still life." Looking specifically at the photographs containing the birdcage, tapestry and picture in a white frame at left, one is able to delve further into this woman’s life.

In *Untitled (Man Smoking)*, the main character looks sideways at a man with whom she is playing cards. With drinking glasses almost empty and cigarette smoke fogging the room, the scene alludes to the more blatantly sexual nature of *Man and Mirror*. However, the look in the woman’s eyes gives insight into the simultaneous desire and trepidation she feels for her card partner. In a sense, this man could become more than just a game partner to her. As a game partner, however, this man acts as not only companion, but adversary and opponent. The text which accompanies *Man Smoking* reinforces the possibilities for this man and woman with lines such as “She needed a man who didn’t mind her bodacious manner, varied talents, hard laughter, multiple opinions and her hopes were getting slender.” Within the narrative, Weems incorporates the thoughts and fears of the man pictured as well as with statements such as “He wasn’t sure, confessing he didn’t have a handle on this thing called life either. But he was definitely in the mood for love. . .”.

Relationships between men and women are one of the foci of the *Kitchen Table* series. Looking at the works that include an standing metal birdcage at far left, *Untitledds (Eating Lobster), (Woman Feeding Bird), and (Woman Playing Solitaire)*, one sees a condensed tale of the strong African-American woman in which this

---

18Kirsh, 14-5.
woman cherishes her mate but is ultimately unwillingly to sacrifice her self-respect, dignity, or life for the sake of her man.

In *Eating Lobster*, the woman caresses with her right hand the head of the man who is seated at the head of the table in her right hand, while smoking a cigarette with her left. The man, with his eyes closed, sucks on what is probably a lobster claw. To his right are an emptied wine glass, as well as three cans of *Budweiser*, presumably also empty. Interestingly, the woman’s lobster is untouched, and her glass full, as if she were so enveloped in her emotion that she could not eat the meal in front of her. The cards have been laid out close to the base of the table, with only the “three of hearts” visible to the viewer. The text which accompanies *Eating Lobster* talks about monogamy, and how she would not ask it of her man, for fear of losing him:

She felt monogamy had a place but invested it with little value. It was a system based on private property, an order defying human nature. Personally she wasn’t in the mood for exploring new rocky terrain. But nonetheless assured him she was secure enough in herself and their love to allow him space to taste the exotic fruits produced in such abundance by mother nature. He was grateful for such generosity. . . .

Implicit in his expression as he sucks the meat out of the lobster, the man’s appreciation for the exotic cuisine seems to be a harbinger of the demise of the relationship. The woman’s tragic and ironic narrative seems a bit desperate; in order to share the fruits of her labor and herself, she subscribes to the belief that her man needs to taste other fruits, or other women.

As the narrative continues in *Woman Feeding Bird*, one sees how the unbalanced dynamic illustrated in *Eating Lobster* collapses. Here, the woman appears

---

19 Text of Weems’s *Untitled (Eating Lobster)* from Andrea Kirsch and Susan Fisher Sterling’s *Carrie*
alone, feeding the bird in the omni-present birdcage with her right hand, and holding a
cigarette in her left. The serenity of the scene is undercut by the text that appears
with the photograph. The woman’s attitude toward the man has changed
dramatically, and so has the man’s, as can be seen in the following excerpt from

*Woman Feeding Bird:*

No really, she fussed, fussed all day long; he was worthless, not a man but
a chump, couldn’t fight his way out of a wet paper bag, she fucked with him all day
long, and all day long he took it all in, and then he quietly exploded. Before she
could collect her wit or make a dash for the door, he seized her and hung her upside-
down out of their seven story apartment window and said, “Talk shit now,
goddamnit!!”

One day he placed a match-box on her clothes.
It was time to book.  

Though the second part of the text bespeaks the loneliness of the woman in *Feeding
Bird*, this photograph as well as *Woman Playing Solitaire*, (the final—textless—work of
the triptych, in which the woman, flanked by cigarettes and a full glass of wine at left
and an ashtray and box of chocolates at right, plays another card game), testify to the
woman’s strength and self-respect. Fittingly, no narrative accompanies this
photograph because there is nothing left to say. Though the scene seems tragic,
Weems’s asserts that there is a certain humor to be seen in the life of this lonely,
chocolate eating woman. Chocolate is said to be a panacea for love as well as a token
of decadence. It is amusing that the woman in *Woman Playing Solitaire* is able to have
the love, stimulation and entertainment that she had sought in a man all by herself.
Indeed, the woman yearns for the love, passion, and “to share it all with a man who


20 According to P.P.O.W Gallery Director, Scott Catto, the inclusion of the birdcage pays homage to
Maya Angelou’s novel *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*.

21 Text of Weems’s *Untitled (Eating Lobster)* from Andrea Kirsch and Susan Fisher Sterling’s *Carrie*
could deal the multitude of her being”. However, based upon the fragmented tale that has been laid out for the viewer, “that would have to come later.”

Weems pays particular attention to the sequencing of the images she presents. In phototextual works, one generally sees the image before the text and returns to the image after having read the text. In the *Kitchen Table* series, the narrative lends another dimension to the photographs. The format of *Untitled* is related to a tradition of narrative photographic fictions and the use of serial photography by conceptual artists. Also, it is clearly related to film, as if we were given a script and storyboards.

In *Woman Feeding Bird*, for instance, the calm of the scene is undercut by the narrative that informs the viewer that the woman had a near-fatal encounter with the man who had been pictured with her earlier. Works such as the *Woman and Daughter* triptych are given more meaning when one reads the texts and discovers that the woman’s feelings towards her child are just as turbulent and multi-layered as everything else to which the observer has been privy. The combination of word and image provides a powerful instrument through which an artist such as Weems can assert the many layers of meaning and information visible in the work. In this light, the cliche “a picture is worth a thousand words” seems insufficient; one sees that in the *Kitchen Table* series photographs juxtaposed with words create a more brilliant, poignant picture.

---


22 excerpts from *Untitled (Woman Feeding Bird)*.

23 Here, the word *narrative* refers to the representation in art of an event or story. See *Webster’s Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary*, 787.
In another storyboard of the *Kitchen Table* series, Weems depicts her protagonist as mother and matriarch in the works that include a white-framed picture that appears at the left side of *Untitled (Mother with Daughter)*, *Untitled (Mother with daughter and children)* and *Untitled (Nude)*, as well as, *Untitled (Mother and Daughter with Makeup)* [not pictured]. In a contestation of traditional depiction of African-American mothers, Weems illustrates her central figure as an individual, rather than a paradigm of a "degenerative" ethnic group, or a symbol of "black pride," she deliberately refuses to offer an absolutely positive or negative portrayal of African-American women.

In *Mother and Daughter with Makeup*, the viewer is introduced to the daughter of the protagonist. Both figures are seated at the table: the mother at the head while the daughter sits to her left. On the table are two mirrors, two lipsticks, mascara and a compact. The familiar endearing moment when the child plays grown-up with what is presumably her mother’s lipstick and a miniature mirror is undercut by the text that accompanies the image. The first paragraph’s tone is light, romantic, and poignant in its optimism. Its positive tone contrasts the text of the second paragraph, in which the protagonist bitterly recalls her unintended initiation into the cult of motherhood:; "When her kid finally stood and walked, she watched with a distant eye, thinking 'Thank God!' I won't have to carry her much longer."

Interestingly, this sentence echoes the ambivalence of the protagonist towards her child. Deeply involved in the process of applying her own lipstick, she shows no

---

24Kirsh, 15
25excerpt from *Untitled (Woman and Daughter with Makeup)*.
acknowledgment of another presence in the room, unlike her gaze in *Man Eating Lobster*.

In the *Untitled (Mother with Daughter)* triptych, each scene includes the mother and daughter, as well as the framed picture at left. The absence of text in this work is appropriate; judging from the expressions of the figures, nothing needs to said to elucidate the narrative. In the first photograph, the woman sits at the table reading a book taking notes on her reading. A full glass, pen, and notepad lie undisturbed on the table, and the child stands in the far left corner looking curiously, or sulkily, at her mother. In the second photograph, the daughter appears at the left corner of the table, belligerently looking towards the right where her mother stands with an admonishing look on her face, lips pursed and cheeks sucked in. Without the assistance of text, the viewer is left to ponder whether the girl has been waiting to come out of her corner, or whether she has intentionally interrupted her mother's reading to get her attention. In the third photograph, the situation has been somewhat resolved; the girl now sits at the table, drawing on the notepad and her mother has returned to her work with a look of weary frustration. The last photograph of the triptych echoes *Mother and Daughter with Makeup*; both figures are engaged in their own "work." Also, the sentence, "Oh yeah, she loved the kid, she was responsible, but took no deep pleasure in motherhood, it caused deflection from her immediate desires, which pissed her off," articulates the intense, realistic expressions of the protagonist. Weems presents a mother who is fully aware of and adherent to the duties of motherhood; however, she feels burdened. This mother is different from the historically depicted African-
American woman: both the overbearing matriarch and welfare mother. She is a responsible mother; however, she is conflicted. She cares, but is not too caring, and not fully responsible for the well-being of the child.

In the third work of the series, *Untitled (Woman and Daughter with Children)*, two more characters are introduced, another young girl and an female adolescent. The daughter of the first two works now sits on the left underneath the framed picture. The mother remains at the head, with her book and notepad. However, she looks pensively at her daughter who is deeply involved in an unspecified game of cards. Placed on the right side of the photograph, the newest figure is enveloped in the game and oblivious to the protagonist seated at center. The woman still wears a tired look upon her face, but this time, she does not express the disdain evident in the *Mother with Daughter*. Perhaps, the woman is thinking about what her daughter is thinking of at that moment and how she feels about the disintegration of her parents' marriage. The text which accompanies the work provides both perspectives. The woman speaks first, lamenting her relationship with the child's father. Her paragraph is full of the words of Negro spirituals, and poetic language and description.26

In the second paragraph, the viewer sees the perspective of the daughter. In the midst of what is presumably the end of her parents' marriage, she expresses the pain and helplessness she feels in a stream of consciousness made up of nursery rhymes and the playground songs she knows best: "She felt like H O T spelled more than hot, like she was little Sally Walker, and not Mary with bleating sheep, like she

26The language Weems employs is reminiscent of Janey, Zora Neale Hurston's protagonist in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. 
wanted to rise and wipe her weeping eyes, like she had been goody and deserved more than a rubber dolly. . . She felt like this mommy/daddy stuff was a remake of jack and jill."27 Through this sing-songy monologue, the viewer witnesses the disintegration of this child's world.

*Untitled (Nude)*, the last work of the condensed narrative, portrays the protagonist at peace. For the first time in the framed photo mini-series, the woman seems calm, and relieved. She sits alone and unclothed at the head of the table. The leaves of the table emphasizes her (and her naked body) as the focus of the viewer's gaze. With her eyes closed and body hidden, the protagonist exudes comfort and relish in her sexual being. Her erect nipples and slightly parted mouth imply an enjoyed moment of solitary sensuality. As a final work of the mini-series, *Nude* asserts the "multitude" of this African-American woman's "being," the one that Weems refers to in *Woman Feeding Bird*. Away from the stresses of motherhood and the tribulations of marriage, this woman is in control of her desire, and ultimately, herself.

The elegant articulation of Weems's work resides in the connections of the title and text to the image. Calvin Reid comments that "Weems's interweaving of folksayings, superstitions, religious rituals and black music evoke the sense of a black group identity formed through the slow accumulation of the group's observation of itself."28 He continues asserting that the pictures and language carry on a dialogue that is not literal, capturing a sometimes ironic, essentially poetic relationship between

---

27 excerpt from *Untitled (Woman and Daughter with Children)*.
28 Calvin Reid. Carrie Mae Weems in *Arts Magazine*, 79.
text, image and viewer. As variables, the title\textsuperscript{29} and text assist in creating the themes of her narrative. Both help to create a more-complete picture that informs the viewer. Framed and displayed adjacent to their respective works, the texts that accompany many of the photographs of the \textit{Kitchen Table} series combine elements of humor, folklore and stream-of-consciousness semantics in a variety of tones. Steadfastly articulate, the tone of the text moves from casual to sardonic to prophetic, eventually disappearing at the end of the series. Written in the third person, the text is firmly anchored in the female voice, even when it opens to allow her lover’s perspective into the narrative. For example, the title \textit{Man Eating Lobster} describes some of the actions occurring in the work; it also alludes to the polygamy to which the man is attracted, given the text that accompanies the title and image. Here, the title, linked with the text, extend the work far beyond the visual. Without the two, the works of the series would not be fully comprehensible. Together, the title and text aid in the viewer’s reading of the work.

However, in looking at the series, one notices the attention that Weems pays to the notion of the “gaze,” or the act of seeing and objectifying anyone on whom the focus of the ‘dominant eye’ might rest. In an interview with bell hooks, Weems speaks about the significance of the gaze, noting that she was constructing the \textit{Kitchen Table} series around the same time that the “politics of the gaze” became part of popular art historical discourse. Noticing the gaps that had been left within the

\textsuperscript{29} Haven spoken with Scott Catto, Director of P.P.O.W. gallery, I learned that he created the titles of the \textit{Kitchen Table} series in order to distinguish each work within the gallery’s catalog of Weems’s work. Although it has been previously asserted that the titles as an integral part of the series, they are, in fact, catto’s practical device, not Weems’s.
discourse, particularly in Laura Mulvey's influential article "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema", Weems decided to consider the gaze in relation to the black female subject: "All the pieces in the Kitchen Table series highlight 'the gaze,' particularly the piece [in Kitchen Table series] where the woman is sitting with a man leaning against her, his head buried in her neck, a mirror placed directly in front of her, but she looks beyond that to [meet the eyes of the would-be gazer]." 

Weems also asserts that the cool confidence that the woman in Man and Mirror presents to the audience refers to the looking back and challenging of the assumptions made by (white) society and art historical discourse about the gaze, and also questions who is in fact looking. Traditionally, the black female subject has been the object of the gaze, not its possessor. Whether portrayed as humble or defiant, the black female subject has generally fallen under the gaze, rather than confronting or contesting it. Weems crafts her works without an assumed (black, white, male, or female) audience; instead, she presents her would-be audience with many layers, or variables, from which he or she can reconstruct the story.

While reassembling the story of the Kitchen Table series, one realizes that the works presented may or may not be in a particular order. For example, the works which include the birdcage are numbers 3, 12, and 14. Within themselves, these works

---

30 Mulvey's article about the "gaze," comes out of critical film discourse in the early nineties; however, the gaze, as a device or phenomenon has been adopted by many feminist artists in their critique of the viewer and notions in contemporary society.
31 hooks interview with Artist, 84-5. Weems refers to Untitled (Man and Mirror). Kirsh remarks in her article that Kitchen Table series consciously responds to the Mulvey's elision of issues concerning the representation of women of color. With her series, "Weems challenges this omission; her protagonist functions independently of her white friends (upsetting the usual role assigned black women in motion pictures). Weems takes control of her own space, refusing to be the compliant object of the 'gaze'," Kirsh 15. See Untitled (Woman with Friends) in Appendix II.
tell a complete story; however, they are also part of the larger series. The same can be said of other works in the *Kitchen Table* series, such as the works that include the tapestry (numbers 6 & 7) and the picture in a white frame (numbers 9, 10, and 13). Weems presents her audience with vignettes of her subject’s life, a life filled with universal concerns such as love, marriage, and solitude, and specifically African-American ones like gender-power dynamics within the African-American community. The pictures have been placed in a sequence; however, the stories depicted do not adhere to one necessary order, they do not illustrate any definite beginning and end to the central figure’s story. These pictures act as vignettes in the larger story of this woman’s life; she is a woman, a lover, a mother, and a grandmother within the series. Each role carries different concerns, different trials and tribulations, but Weems delivers them in a way that is clever, self-referential, and staggeringly informative.

The fact that the woman pictured is Weems herself provides the viewer with yet another variable in his or her understanding of the series. Weems not only comments and contests “the gaze,” she directly challenges it by placing herself into the positions of the viewer, the viewed, and the creator. She is the appropriated erotic subject, mother, lover, friend, matriarch as well as the intellect and vision behind them. She allows us to enter the “emotional universe” of the subjects in the series.

---

32 Calvin Reid asserts similar ideas in his review of the series, stating that “these open-ended scenarios, the surrogates for family, friends, and the varying social tropes associated with them, combine to reenact the real dilemmas and intimate relations of home, and exemplify the prosaic drama of human problem-solving. *Arts Magazine*, 79.
and her own. As viewers, we witness the events of this woman’s life, but we also enter into her world on the other side of the *Kitchen Table*. We become listeners and silent participants as she confronts the viewer as a successful African-American woman attempting to raise a family and salvage a romantic relationship. She is not the welfare mother, nor is she is domineering matriarch of previous depictions of African-American women; here, she is a mother, a lover, and a woman. In *Art on My Mind*, bell hooks notes that in the *Kitchen Table* series, Weems asserts a complexity within black identity that has been denied, and not only by the politics of race but by a politics of culture, and particularly that of a vernacular culture in opposition to high culture. hooks’s assertions articulate the profundity of the issues on which Weems bases her works of this series; however, her adversarial standpoint creates a somewhat inaccessible analysis of Weems’s work.

By dealing with the gaze and placing herself in the works, Weems gives us her conceptions about female identity and blackness—among many other issues in contemporary society. The *Kitchen Table* series presents us with the multifaceted reality. Weems comments that “reality shapes the pictures [of the *Kitchen Table* series]—the way the images are constructed.” Along with text, Weems utilizes other traditions of African-American culture, such as musical cultures: the blues and jazz. In the same way that these musical genres evoke the rich visual world in which the music is played, Weems evokes the rich emotional response and sensibility embedded

---
33 Reid comments that “Weems herself stars in the [*Kitchen Table* series], although they are not simply about her life but about the lives of black people and black women in particular, and translate quickly in sharp lessons about American life in general. See “Carrie Mae Weems” in *Arts Magazine*, page 79.
not only in the work she creates but also in the world in which she, the central subject of the series, lives.35

Through these devices, Weems presents us with a rich, complex vision of the black female subject. She uses the photograph and phototexts as tools to insert what she refers to as her culturally fluid voice in an examination of issues of feminism, race, and representation, creating works that are beautiful, seductive, and culturally meaningful.36 Within the series, as well as the rest of her work, she urges us to challenge simplistic, traditional, fixed notions of looking. Until we are able to look in a new way and develop a new “gaze,” one that no longer objectifies and dehumanizes, we will continue to have very little understanding of the black subject. In the *Kitchen Table* series, Weems presents us with some of the resources that will enable us to find a new, enlightened way of delving into and fully comprehending the magnitude and complexity of the African-American female subject.

---

34 hooks, 89.
35 Carrie Mae Weems in hooks, 89.
CONCLUSION

In regard to his work, artist Christian Boltanski asked that his art not only be read as a direct and poetic response to the horrors of the Holocaust, but also as a meditation on the universal truths of life and death. As African-American women photographers, Lorna Simpson and Carrie Mae Weems choose to present their creative vision using an archetypal black woman as their muse. A signifier of both the historical and the quotidian, the notion of African-American woman that each artist presents elevates the subject from a formerly objectified or invisible status. In this age of multiculturalism, one must be wary of the assimilationist undertones inherent in universalizing everything. As members of humanity, people from different walks of life share common concepts—such as family, and sexuality—that transcend ethnicity and time. However, these similar notions do not preclude the specific and unique experiences of people from different backgrounds. For some this difference has often brought exploitation, degradation, and violation in many forms.

The twentieth century has been a time marked with revolutionary changes in the technological capacities of the human being. At the same time, as we come closer together and win our respective egalitarian freedoms, we realize the shortcomings or neglect of those people and/or movements that have come before us. For many women of color, the unkept promises and deferred visions of feminism have become
apparent. For artists of the late twentieth century, the camera functioned as a means through which they were able to create “realities” that challenged traditional notions of representaiton and identity.

Looking at the works of African-American women at the end of the twentieth century, one witnesses the active reclamation of social and cultural history through the examination of hegemonic cultural attitudes toward minority groups in the United States. For Simpson and Weems, the re-appropriation takes place in the re-presentation of traditional modern and postmodern art methods combined with specifically African-American culture. The folk practice of “signifying” becomes a signifier for specific cultural attitudes that have persevered in the face of oppression. Rather than answering the questions of the spectator, photography, itself, has become the inquisitor.

The works of Lorna Simpson and Carrie Mae Weems contribute to the societal integration of the ideas of Black Feminist Thought, consistent with the ideas of feminism (inclusive of all women), yet distinct with regard to the daily and historic reality of diasporan African women in the Western world.

Both women draw from their impressive depth and breadth through personal experience as well as literary and art historical traditions that have come before them in their creative vision. As artists, they have also drawn upon the essential concepts of the time in which they live (identity, representation, and information through image and text) to reposition the African-American female subject.
Appendix 1: Lorna Simpson

The following are reproductions* of the artist’s selected work from 1982-1991.

These reproductions are taken from Willis, Deborah. 1992. Lorna Simpson; Wright, Beryl. 1992. For the Sake of the Viewer and Heresies #15.
BY LORNA SIMPSON

She works as a maid in a house I am visiting. We are introduced and recognize each other as strangers in a foreign land. She speaks Portuguese and Italian. I speak English. We communicate in sign language and Italian. Her employers tell me she is "like a part of the family." We have both heard that before. Her family is far away. She works hard, saves her earnings and goes back home two months out of the year. She is 19 years old. One evening she arrived late for work. I entered her room; she had scratches on her breasts and above her eye, which was swollen. She needed closeness, to be embraced, to feel protected. Her employers couldn't afford her this comfort. I wanted to hold her longer to make sure she had realized that this was not her fault. She should feel anger and want to kill. Between our silences we knew why this had happened: our skin considered "exotic," targeted for brutal fantasies in cultures that interpret us as an object to be filled with nightmare. There is no one to call in case of such an emergency. But calling on ourselves. They called her into the next room to sit and watch a TV comedy to calm herself. I wanted to hold her longer.

Lorna Simpson, a photographer, is studying for her Master's degree at the University of California, San Diego.

Untitled (Irene), 1982

Screen 1, 1986
(front)
Screen 1, 1986
(back)
SHE SAW HIM BY THE RIVER
THEY ASKED HER TO TELL WHAT HAPPENED
ONLY TO DISCOUNT HER MEMORY

Waterbearer, 1986
"Untitled (Two Necklines), 1989"
Necklines, 1989
Three Seated Figures, 1989
Same, 1991
You're Fine, 1989

40 x 103 inches in all
Appendix II: Carrie Mae Weems Images

The following images are reproductions* of works in the Untitled (Kitchen Table Series) and Colored People series of 1989 and 1990.

With the exceptions of the works from the Colored People series, all works measure $27\frac{1}{4} \times 27 \frac{1}{4}$ inches

Honey Colored Boy
Untitled (Man Smoking)
She'd been pickin' em up and layin' em down, moving to the next town for a while, needing a rest, some moss under her feet, plus a solid man who enjoyed a good fight with a brave woman. She needed a man who didn't mind her bodacious manner, varied talents, hard laughter, multiple opinions, and her hopes were getting slender.

He had great big eyes like diamonds and his teeth shined just like gold, some reason a lot of women didn't want him, but he satisfied their souls. He needed a woman who didn't mind stepping down from the shade of the veranda, a woman capable of taking up the shaft of a plough and throwing down with him side by side.

They met in the glistening twinkling crystal light of August/September sky. They were both educated, corn-fed-healthy-Mississippi-stock folk. Both loved fried fish, greens, blues, jazz and Carmen Jones. He was an unhardened man of the world. She'd been around the block more than once herself, wasn't a tough cookie, but a full grown woman for sure.

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 thing 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.

Text — Untitled (Man Smoking)
Man and Mirror
Untitled (Man Eating Lobster)
She felt monogamy had a place but invested it with little value. It was a system based on private property, an order defying human nature. Personally she wasn’t in the mood for exploring new rocky terrain. But nonetheless assured him she was secure enough in herself and their love to allow him space to taste the exotic fruits produced in such abundance by mother nature.

He was grateful for such generosity. He certainly knew the breadth of his own nature, so felt human nature was often in need of social control. For now he chose self-sacrifice for the long term benefits of her love and their relationship. Testing the strength of the relationship in this way was a dangerous game; taking a chance now might be more than either of them bargained for.

Text — Untitled (Man Eating Lobster)
Untitled (Woman Playing Solitaire)
He wasn't working and she was, but ends meeting, ha! 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, like women were the mules on the world, like she needed to go tell it on the mountain, like she wanted to take a rocking chair down by the river and rock on away from here, like good morning heart ache sit down, like she needed to reach out and touch somebody's hand, like she needed her soul rocked in the bosom of Abraham, like momma said there'd be days like this, like her man didn't love her, like she needed him to try a little tenderness. Like maybe she'd get herself a white man, see what he'd do.

John and Mary sitting in a tree
k-i-s-s-i-n-g.
First comes love, then comes marriage;
then comes Mary with a baby carriage.

The kid had seen her parents loving and fighting, and had started playing house herself. She felt like HOT spelled more than hot, like she was little Sally Walker, and not Mary with bleating sheep, like she wanted to rise and wipe her weeping eyes, like she had been goody and deserved more than a rubber dolly, like Mother May I was too real to be called a game, like step on a crack and break your mommas's back could be a plan, like red light, green light was the song to the key of life, like spinning the bottle could cause her to holler, like putting your foot on the right and letting the boys see you cock would have to wait, like hide and seek might be the best bet, like boys were rotten just like cotton described every boy she knew, like girls were dandy like candy described her to a tee, like dick, jane and their parents needed to take a hike, like over the rainbow was where it was at, even though she didn't like flying. Like being the best at jacks didn't mean dooty-squat. She felt like this mommy/daddy stuff was a remake of jack and jill.
Untitled (Woman with friends)
Images 1 and 2 of Untitled (Woman and Daughter) triptych
Image 3 of Untitled (Woman and Daughter) triptych
Untitled (Nude)
Selected Bibliography:
Works Cited and Consulted


Griffin, Farah Jasmine. "Venus Rising: The Personal as Critical".


Rony, Fatimah Tobing. "We Must First See Ourselves."


Wolf, Sylvia. *Focus: Five Women Photographers*.

Articles from Wadsworth Atheneum Artists' Files:


Fairbrother, Trevor. Interview with Lorna Simpson.


Wallis, Brian. “Questioning Documentary.”