

# Carrie Mae Weems: Writing A Universal African American History

Edward Maza  
Yale University

Implicit in the comparison between Kruger and Weems is the notion that Kruger, as a white artist, is free to explore the representative possibilities of her work, while Weems, as a black artist, should stick with her “personal narratives” of race and gender. Weems has very publicly and explicitly voiced her frustration with such reductionist characterizations of her work. After winning the prestigious MacArthur fellowship in 2013, she explained that her “disadvantage [as a woman of color], when I am viewed by the world I am viewed only in relation to my black subjectivity, even though I am a very complex woman... [My work] is partially about race, but considerably more.”(Macfound) Weems, like so many black artists, has often been reduced to a racial type by the elite art world. Weems in no way is trying to shed her African American identity; rather, she is attempting to embed her race as one aspect of her complex and intersectional identity.

In her photographic work, *Congo, Ibo, Mandingo, Togo*, 1993, from the series *Slave Coast*, Weems depicts Elmina Castle, a site of modern African American pilgrimage, both as a construction of an ethnic origin myth and as a way of establishing her own place in the dominantly white world of fine arts. [Image to be included here] Using manipulation of color, frame, presentation, and subject, Weems is able to produce a work that is strikingly powerful in both its particular cultural significance as a key site of African American history and its universal message of human suffering and oppression. In the photos she assesses and writes African American history, while challenging herself and the viewer to grapple with their responsibility to that past, and uses the particular history of Elmina Castle to convey a universal message.

## Formation of Imposed African American Identity through Art and Architecture

African American historical memory is intimately intertwined with material culture. In the face of oppression and exploitation art allowed enslaved people to express, “the power of creative will over forces of destruction” (Bernier 11). The creative urge was not just a way of expressing creative power, but also a way to search for agency (Bernier 17).

However, even though there is a rich history of African American art, stretching back to a time long before emancipation, enslaved African Americans have historically been depicted by white artists as passive, submissive, and indifferent to the creation of material art (Bernier 8). The prevalent narrative of slave history perpetuates the notion that because enslaved people had no time of their own, they could not have produced visual art (Bernier 3). However, the claim that African Americans did not produce art during enslavement is patently false; they did, in fact, produce art—just not art that is valued by the white art world as fine art (Bernier 8). This misconception continues to color the way African American artists are viewed by the elite art world and the ways in which their work is viewed merely as a product of their racial experiences (Bernier 8).

The image of the slave as a passive character in history was first notably presented on May 6, 1861, at the Third Annual London Exhibition of the Royal Academy of Arts, with the unveiling of Eyre Crowe’s abolitionist painting, *Slaves Waiting for Sale* (McInnis 1). Crowe’s painting was a marked departure from traditional depictions of enslaved people done by white artists. Whereas, until *Slaves Waiting for Sale*, enslaved people were generally depicted laboring or at auction, Crowe’s painting humanized them by repositioning the slaves as passive victims to the actions of the three prospective buyers (McInnis 9). Instead of focusing on labor or the chaos of the auction, Crowe makes the slaves the focus of attention, forcing the viewer to confront their humanity and evoke sympathy (McInnis 12). However, *Slaves Waiting for Sale* is also exemplary of the ways in which the white art world understood African American art: exotic, tragic, and most importantly black. Crowe’s painting represents African Americans as nothing more than a passive marginalized group, who only

have value in so much as they help the white viewer to understand the struggle of the slave. Even though *Slaves Waiting for Sale* was an important work in advancing abolitionism, it nonetheless reduces black bodies to the objects of white control and domination, and thereby limits them as merely the passive subjects of said oppression. *Slaves Waiting for Sale*, and other similar paintings create the white narrative of African American history, which is characterized by lack of agency, passivity, and submission.

Painting is not the only way in which African American history has been characterized by passive submission to white authorities. The historic sites of slavery have a history of the slave trade embedded within their architecture and the ways in which they are presented to the public. Elmina Castle, the subject of Weem's *Congo, Ibo, Mandingo, Togo* is not only the site of a specific history of the various people who inhabited it, but has also gained a new significance as a symbol for the history of the slave trade.

Elmina Castle has a long and complicated history, stretching back to its construction in 1482 by the Portuguese for control of the "gold coast" gold trade in what is today Ghana ("Elmina"). The castle was the first European building constructed in tropical Africa (Bruner 290-304). In 1637 it was captured by the Dutch who used the castle as a part of the slave trade in Ghana ("Elmina"). During their time in Africa, the Dutch did not venture far inland to capture and enslave locals; rather, the inhabitants sold other Africans to the Dutch as a part of the African slave trade (Bruner 296). More than 200 years later, in 1872, the castle was once again captured, this time by the British as a part of their colonial enterprise (Bruner 292). Finally, when Ghana became independent in 1957, the castle fell under Ghanaian control, and the space was used as the Edinaman Day Secondary School, the office of Ghanaian Education Services, the district assembly, and then a police-training academy, before it became a popular tourist location and a UNESCO world heritage site, which it remains today (Bruner 292). Slavery is, in other words, only a part of Elmina Castle's history, and yet in the African American memory, it has become emblematic of the slave experience, and pilgrimage to the castle has become a "necessary act of self realization for the

spirits of the diaspora who are somehow tied to these historic structures" (Bruner 291).

The competing histories of the castle have become a source of tension among African Americans and Ghanaians. African American tourists tend to view the site as sacred, and emblematic of a greater sense of the present that could have been had if their ancestors remained in Africa (Bruner 293). Though few tourists can trace their lineage back to Elmina, it has become a symbol of the experience of enslavement, and as such many ascribe their own personal histories to it (Richards 620). The way in which the castle is presented to the public encourages such fabrication. There are very few personal artifacts on display in the museum in order to grant greater freedom of imagination to the visitors (Richards 625-626). The castle is emblematic of the notion that, as scholar Sandra Richards puts it, "meaning is not inherent in an object but resides in the narratives that we ascribe to it" (Richards 627). The lack of inherent meaning is even further exemplified by the fact that native Ghanaians conceive of the castle in radically different terms than do African American tourists. Whereas African American visitors view Elmina Castle exclusively in reference to its history as a site of Slavery, Ghanaians understand it in terms of its longer history of colonialism and economics (Bruner 292).

The ideological division between Ghanaians and African Americans is perhaps most strongly evident in the Ghanaian attitudes towards western tourists. Residents of Ghana are highly dependent on western tourists, as sixty three percent of their economy is generated through tourism, and a large portion of those tourists are African Americans on heritage tours, seeking to reconnect with their families' native home (Bruner 291). Even though African Americans believe that they are *coming home*; the local residents view them as foreigners and even call black western tourists "white," the same way they refer to all foreigners regardless of race. (Bruner 295). This disdain for western tourists is multifaceted. In part it is because many tourists treat the local inhabitants as primitive and photograph them as a part of the scenery in a way that Ghanaians claim misrepresents them and their home (Bruner 299). Furthermore, local residents are denied entry to the castle except as tourists

(Bruner 294). There are large signs by the entrances reading, “This area restricted to all persons except tourists,” further alienating local residents in their own homes (Bruner 298). Additionally, there is an ongoing battle over whether or not to paint and modernize the building (Bruner 291). The local authorities would like to paint the building and upgrade its climate control and electricity. However, African American tourists feel that the building is sacred ground and cannot be beautified or updated; the building should bear the markers of its past as a site of enslavement (Bruner 291). In some ways the building has already been updated and beautified, but ongoing concern over ownership and who has the right to decide how the castle should be presented complicates attempts to modify the structure (Bruner 300). African Americans and Ghanaians have effectively and tragically created a new source of hostility over the representation of a site that is a symbol of oppression to both groups.

Because of its complicated past, different groups want the building preserved and presented in different ways to commemorate different events (Bruner 291-293). And yet, despite all of the controversy, certain aspects of the buildings architecture immutably represent Elmina Castle as a site of slavery and oppression. When describing her interest in architecture in general, Weems explains that, “architecture is that thing that really is the emblem [of power]... The expression of power—or not—is endemic in the architecture itself” (Brooklyn Museum). Regardless of which history is being represented, the castle in and of itself bears the marks of colonial power dynamics. Part of this demonstrated power dynamic is inherent to general castle architecture as, “dominant localities that define boundaries, that tell us who has the right to be inside the castle... and who is outside on the periphery” (Bruner 302). The nature of a castle as a looming fortress inherently divides people based on who is in the castle and who is outside and who gets to choose who is where.

Other elements of the Elmina Castle’s architecture are specific to its time and power as a seat of the slave trade. Some of these elements, like the smell and the color of the walls, are fleeting and easily changed (Bruner 291). Others are more permanent and evident as long as the building is

standing. One such example is the width of the passageways, which are intentionally narrow to prevent the escape of the enslaved peoples (Richards 624). Additionally, the structure of the building reflects the perpetrated atrocities. The top levels of the castle were open and reserved for the Dutch, while the bottom levels were outfitted with dark dungeons in which African people were held before being shipped to either North America or the Caribbean (“Elmina Castle - Ghana”).

When selecting a setting for *Congo, Ibo, Mandingo, Togo*, Weems avoided the conflict of representation and built her history from the immutable elements of the building’s architecture. *Congo, Ibo, Mandingo, Togo* is made up of three twenty-inch by twenty-inch square panels. The three panels are meant to be displayed horizontally in glass frames in a gallery. The panel furthest to the left is tan with red words in the center reading, “*Congo, Ibo, Mandingo, Togo.*” The center panel is a square black and white photograph of one of the narrow corridors of Elmina Castle, with an ominous black shadow of a door, looming at the end of the path. The panel on the far right is entirely black, with three rectangles of light arranged in a triangle in the center of the square (Weems). Each panel of the work depicts an unchangeable aspect of Elmina Castle. Utilizing the explicit connection between the castle and slavery, Weems is able to create an unchallengeable documentation of her own encounter with the site through the allegedly objective lenses of the camera, and by extension help to create an African American founding myth in relation to the castle.

Weems recognizes the significance of founding myths in the ways in which people live their daily lives, and how those myths affect the way people experience the world (Brooklyn Museum). Weems believes that these myths start from and influence a, “very small place of a kind of material culture, how people arrange their personal environments, to ultimately how we arrange society itself” (Brooklyn Museum). For Weems the questions surrounding Elmina Castle are quite substantial, as they so strongly affect the structure of the African American community and society more broadly.

## Formal Analysis of *Congo, Ibo, Mandingo, Togo*

Each panel of *Congo, Ibo, Mandingo, Togo* contributes in a different way to the construction of the historical narrative Weems builds with her photographs. Independently, they each bear tremendous weight in her commentary on the African American experience and society generally. Taken together they also construct a myth of conception of the African American community.

The panel furthest to the left, bearing the red text, “*Congo, Ibo, Mandingo, Togo*,” bears the most explicit reference to a specific people. This panel is the only one bearing an overt marking of identity. Congo, Ibo, Mandingo, and Togo are all references to places and peoples in western Africa. Congo and Togo are both modern states, Ibo and Mandingo are both historic groups of people native to west Africa (“Igbo | People”).

Though this panel bears explicit markings of identity, there is no way to tie those identities with any distinct person. Because there are no people depicted in the panel it is impossible to define portrayed identities without some sort of prior knowledge. In this way, the text is both explanatory and independent from the other photographs in the triptych (Weems, Piché, and Golden 15). By referencing Africa and African peoples, Weems is making an explicit connection between the viewer, herself, and Africa without defining what that relationship should be. In relation to the photographs it could be viewed as defining those implicated in the setting, Elmina Castle. Taken on its own, the text is itself an invitation for the viewer to envision identities for the listed groups. This leaves room for any viewer to potentially see herself in relation to the groups and implicitly impose these identity categories reflexively on her.

The reflexivity of identity stands in stark contrast to Weems’s use of red and textual identification in her series of portraits, *From Here I saw What Happened and I Cried* (1995). [Image to be included here] This later work in many ways is an inversion of the panel of text in *Congo, Ibo, Mandingo, Togo*. In *From Here I saw What Happened and I Cried*, Weems is imposing prescribed identities onto portraits of Black bodies by grafting white text onto the red portraits. The text in this later work is the identities imposed on

African Americans by white society. In contrast, *Congo, Ibo, Mandingo, Togo* invites the viewer to impose the identity on the text, which is literally printed on a blank canvas, thus allowing the viewer to construct his or her own image around the text. “Congo, Ibo, Mandingo, Togo” is not defined by an accompanying picture, in the manner that the text in *From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried* is defined in relationship with the portraits it is printed over, but rather is defined by the viewer in relationship to the viewer’s own subjectivity. These two series of photographs, taken in tandem, are distinct challenges to both the white art world and the African American community.

In *From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried* Weems explores what Americanist Celest-Marie Bernier describes as, “the problem of the White dominated art world that does not usually conceptualize blacks as visual producers, as well as a historical and political context under which black bodies were raped, soled, and denied agency under slavery and segregation in the United States” (Bernier 15) The photos in *From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried* demonstrate the ways in which black bodies were defined and objectified by white oppressors, and challenge both white and black viewers to confront that prescriptive history (Stanford). *Congo, Ibo, Mandingo, Togo* stands in strong contrast to *From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried*. By removing the prescriptive text from the objectified bodies, Weems, in *Congo, Ibo, Mandingo, Togo*, challenges the viewer to define these categories, forcing African American viewers to become “creators” of their own histories and identities while simultaneously creating a work that is accepted and appreciated by the “white art world” as the visual product of an African American artist. The shift in representation from *Congo, Ibo, Mandingo, Togo* to *From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried* is demonstrative of Weems’s struggle to find an aesthetic language that successfully provides agency and responsibility to its subjects (Bernier 17).

Like the panel of text, the Middle panel with a black and white picture of a passageway in Elmina Castle, also raises questions of agency and responsibility. But, while the text challenges the viewer to define a historic identity, the middle panel forces the viewer to consider the ways in which she



is complicit in her own loss of agency and submission to oppressive forces. Weems presents power as a negotiable relationship, refusing to accept that oppression is inevitable. Weems articulates this conception of power by questioning, as she puts it, “How am I complicit in what happens to me? ... How do I relinquish authority and power to men or any other entity in my life that then orchestrates it and controls it, and bends it and flexes it to its own needs, its own will”(Brooklyn Museum). This question of agency and power is built into the architecture of the castle.

As mentioned above, castle architecture in general exudes power and notions of exclusion and oppression (Bruner 303). But Weems takes this inherent aspect of castle architecture a step further by meticulously staging the view of the castle to reflect the compromised autonomy of its inhabitants. The long walkway depicted in the center panel leaves the imagined figure in the castle with little freedom to move around the space. She can either move towards the dark door or out of the frame towards the viewer. The walkway is only wide enough for people to walk through in single file, an intentional mitigation of the autonomy of the inhabitants (Richards 625). Even though the informed viewer knows whose freedom was being suppressed on the pathway, to the uninitiated, the frame bears none of the connotations of slavery or African identity so clearly evident in the panel of text. Viewed independently the viewer could imagine anyone on the pathway, free to choose how to navigate the space. The universalizing of the space complicates the narrative of inevitable enslavement otherwise encoded in the building.

However, the non-figurative nature of the central panel adds a layer of submission to the dominating architecture of the space (ART21). Weems has said that, “architecture in its essence is about power”(ART21). In her series *Roaming*, Weems photographs herself in front of historic buildings in Roam as a statement of defiance against the power of the architecture and what it represents (ART21). [Image to be included here] In the central panel of *Congo, Ibo, Mandingo, Togo*, she allows the structure to dominate the space, and by extension leaves the power emanated by the architecture unchecked. In a way, Weems’s refusal to challenge the authority of the structure is her

posing the question of inevitability and agency to the viewer. In what ways is the viewer complicit in the atrocities associated with Elmina Castle? What are the viewers’ responsibilities to create a future in which the authority represented by Elmina is challenged? The work allows the viewer to approach these questions from opposing lenses. She can either view herself in the role of the oppressor, complicit with his crimes, or in the role of the enslaved person, evoking a strong sense of empathy.

The final panel, displayed on the far right, is the most universal of the three, baring absolutely no markings of architecture, personage, or identifiable landscape. Taken in isolation from the other two, there is no way to identify what it is a photograph of. Unlike the central panel, which uses architecture to initiate the space, there is no architectural indication of who belongs in the space of the third panel. In the context of the greater work it becomes clear that this scene is in fact a dungeon prison, intended for occupancy by enslaved Africans; however, to the uninformed viewer it can be a space intended for anyone. Any history of oppression can be imposed on to this abstraction of space.

Through the emptiness of the final panel, Weems is able to break free from a constraint she regularly struggles with as a black artist: how to be viewed as more than her black subjectivity (Macfound). Weems has often expressed that she feels her work is under-appreciated, as it is viewed exclusively in racial terms (Weems, Piché, and Golden 10–11). Weems recognizes, and is fighting against the notion, that black bodies cannot represent universal ideas; however, she has recognized that, “the way blacks are represented in our culture makes it impossible to get that point across, so I’m now asking the questions [about the “human condition”] in a different way” (Weems, Piché, and Golden 12). *Congo, Ibo, Mandingo, Togo* in its entirety is evidence of Weems’s struggle to resolve how “blacks and materials associate with blacks could stand for more than themselves and more than a problem, they can speak about the human condition”(Weems, Piché, and Golden 12) The leftmost panel of text is explicitly a reference to race, but because there is no image to tie it to, it is easily isolated from the message of the images themselves, and viewers may not necessarily

understand the connection between the text and image. The central image continues this trend, representing a space that is emblematic of a racial experience but again could be understood in universal terms. The final black image is the most universal, simultaneously bearing absolutely no reference to race or racial spaces while in fact being a depiction of a highly racialized space. The imprisonment referenced in this final panel is not exclusively a black experience, but rather is a universal challenge to viewers of all backgrounds to confront their own histories and sacrificing of agency and autonomy. Weems makes a specifically black experience and space into a site of universal reflection.

The universality of *Congo, Ibo, Mandingo, Togo* becomes even clearer in the presentation of the photographs. Each of the three pages is framed in highly reflective glass (Weems). The frames literally impose the face of the viewer onto the images. Regardless of race, the viewer is forced to place herself into the world of the image. The reflective nature of the work is a signature of Weems's oeuvre. Weems explains that she regularly creates "visual and acoustic environments where the viewer is asked to join the creation of a shared experience of acknowledgement, recognition, and change" (Weems, Piché, and Golden 10). *Congo, Ibo, Mandingo, Togo* is no exception, and much of the impetus lies on the viewer to ascribe meaning to the photographs.

However, though Weems grants the viewer a tremendous amount of creative authority, in no way is the viewer completely free to fabricate the entire myth surrounding the photos. In its original instillation, the work was hung in a gallery surrounded by images of black bodies and a depiction of Eve, from the biblical creation story (Weems, Piché, and Golden 19). This juxtaposition strongly implies that *Congo, Ibo, Mandingo, Togo* is meant to be read as a creation story, and in many ways it has become one. The multitude of ways through which it is possible to understand the photographs is similar to the tourist experience of Elmina Castle, the subject of the photographs. There are many different historical narratives written into the castle, and it is up to the visitor to determine which narrative he or she would like to

read, within the limits of the available evidence (Bruner 293-294).

### The Documentary Nature of Weems's Work

According to one of the curators of a 1998 retrospective of Weems' work, "Weems plays with the idea of documentary photography, subverting, even while appropriating the authority of the genre" (Weems, Piché, and Golden 10). Photography claims to be a tool of history. It allegedly captures things as they are, without bias. However, Weems exploits this assumption about photography to create what she describes as, "representations that appear to be documents but were in fact staged" (Macfound). Weems understands herself as "a narrator of history," and uses her work to construct a historical narrative of both the genesis of the African American community and human responses to oppression more broadly (Bernier 16).

Writing the genesis of the African American community is particularly challenging for Weems, as she is attempting to document a history that was not recorded from the vantage point she wants to present, and that requires, as Ruth Mayer notes, "another structure than the realist ones of representation" (Mayer 556). To accomplish her goal, Weems embarks on what Salamishah Tillet calls, "myth making process in which she [Weems] creates a fiction out of the truths she encounters rather than finding a truth deep within fictions" (Tillet 131).

In order to find the "truths" of the genesis of the slave trade, she travels from the United States to Ghana, reversing the Middle Passage journey (Tillet 131). By making Ghana the destination of her journey, she is constructing a likely fictitious origin story in which her ancestors passed through Elmina Castle (Tillet 134). The Africa in her photographs is not the Ghana she visited on her trip, but rather the mythic Africa of her murky past (Tillet 135). Paradoxically to make her genesis story more authentic, she manipulates the photographs such that they represent the origin story she is trying to tell, not document the place she went. Her photographs are non-figurative and bear no markings of time (Weems, Piché, and Golden 18). They could have been taken at any point.

She then further distorts the pictures by developing them in black and white. In addition to contributing to the timelessness of the photos, the black and white also implies a strict binary in much the same way Genesis does, through which to understand the picture (Tillet 136). Origin stories are rarely nuanced in their evaluation of actions. In Genesis there is the word of God and there is sin; by rendering her images in black and white, Weems draws out similar dichotomies in her founding story, the oppressed and the oppressor (Tillet 136). By producing her pictures in black and white, and photographing only the elements of the castle that are inherently tied to slavery, Weems avoids the conflict between modern Ghanaians and African Americans. In *Congo, Ibo, Mandingo, Togo*, there is no controversy over paint color, smell, or how different parts of the castle are portrayed; they are presented without color and without controversy. However, even though this binary is representative of the lives of slaves, Weems's photographs in actuality are more nuanced: they only appear to be documentary.

### **Achievements of *Congo, Ibo, Mandingo, Togo***

Weems is keenly aware of the way in which she is fabricating a constructed history, and how truly complicated that history is. While in Ghana she was referred to as white and was denied access to certain sites as a foreigner (Weems, Piché, and Golden 17) She does not rewrite history in order to be manipulative or disingenuous; rather, she tries to use relics of history to teach a universal message. *Congo, Ibo, Mandingo, Togo* is simultaneously an attempt to construct an African American founding myth and comment on the human experience of oppression and resistance. Early on in her career, Weems determined that, "referencing documentary was important [to her]... so [she] learned fairly early that photographs are constructed, and these [constructed] realities can be just as poignant and meaningful as something 'documentary in nature,' so that you were able to arrive at and deal with multiple levels of complexity around the construction of photographs"(Estrin). In *Congo, Ibo, Mandingo, Togo* Weems exploits the documentary nature of photography in order to construct an alternative narrative of history.

The documentary style of *Congo, Ibo, Mandingo, Togo* achieves the "multiple levels of complexity" Weems referred to. Superficially, it is a whitewashed history of the origins of the African American community at Elmina Castle. However, upon closer inspection, the work reveals a much more complicated reality.

The highly reflective nature of the work allows African American viewers to impose their own identities into the images. They can ascribe their origins to the narrative of the panels. They are free to imagine themselves as Congo, Ibo, Mandingo, or Togo; however, Weems makes this understanding unsatisfying and even weak. The absent inhabitants of the images lack personal autonomy; they become subjects of the labels and the space and are ultimately imprisoned. In *Congo, Ibo, Mandingo, Togo* the subject does not challenge the oppressive authority.

Weems's own experience creating *Congo, Ibo, Mandingo, Togo* underscores the mere partial truth of the superficial genesis reading of the work. Ghana is not in fact Weems's home. In Ghana she is white, a stranger (Weems, Piché, and Golden 17). She can choose to ignore the tension between her and the local population but ultimately there is tension between her world and theirs (Bruner 298-299). Even if her ancestors had passed through Elmina, it is no longer her home; she is not welcome there. In the eyes of the local inhabitants she came from America (Weems, Piché, and Golden).

And so the work can be read with a greater level of complexity than had the work been rooted in unquestioned historical record. Perhaps, *Congo, Ibo, Mandingo, Togo* is not merely a tale of history but a forced reckoning with one's own history and identity, and the ways in which the viewer is complicit in her own suffering. When read as a document of history, slavery and oppression are its inevitable subjects. Exploitation is rooted in the walls of the castle; it is the way white society defines people of color. But if treated as a critique of submission, the work's meaning radically shifts. The viewer can then address Weems's fundamental question: how are people "accomplices in their own victimization?"(Stanford). This is not meant to blame the victim for his or her suffering, but rather

to show her that her suffering is not inevitable. The viewer has the power to define her own identity; there is no figure ascribed to the identifying labels. The viewer's reflection stands as a challenge to the power embedded in the architecture of the castle.

Ultimately, *Congo, Ibo, Mandingo, Togo* is not a work about one single experience, but rather uses a particular historical myth to convey a universal message. The work simultaneously exists in relation to and independent from African American identity. Regardless of race, the viewer sees her own image reflected back to her in the glass frames of the images. She is confronted with her own history, complicity, and victimization. Weems succeeds in using materials associated with history of representation of African Americans to comment on the human condition universally, not merely in reference to the material's inherent racial connotations.

Weems seems to understand, though, that she has not been able to fully escape her mitigation to her "black subjectivity." She strongly holds onto her African American identity and explicitly states that, "Notions of black representation are still very important to me, and will always be a concern. In fact, it is now absolutely my assumption that people of color do speak to something bigger than themselves. I assume that that is just fine, whether writers and critics get it or not—it's not my problem. If they don't get it then my work is misunderstood and racialized"(Weems, Piché, and Golden 12). Her identity as an African American woman is important to her, but not as an end in and of itself, but as a tool through which to better understand humanity in a way that extends beyond the boundaries of race. Weems is using African American history and representation in the same way that Winslow Homer used white American history; not primarily as essentialized racial entities, but rather as ways of understanding humanity on a grand scale. So even though Ken Johnson was not incorrect to categorize Carrie Mae Weems's work as an exploration of "issues of race and gender through domestic images and personal narratives," his bewilderment at the lack of references to black female bodies in his New York Times review of *Who What Where When* demonstrates a fundamental misunderstanding of the complexity of Weems's work, a misunderstanding which she feels

is imposed not just on her as a black artist, but upon black bodies in general.

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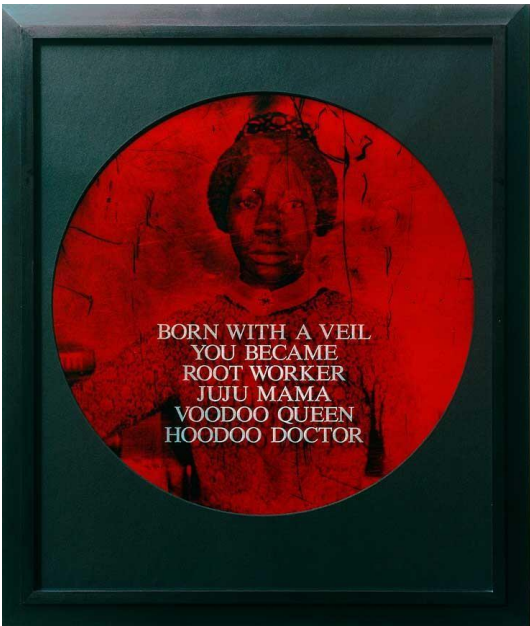
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