

**Listening to the Sounds in Carrie Mae Weems's Kitchen.
Performing the Photograph, Inventing Modernity's Black Female Social Subject
Through Conceptual Document[ary].**

In this essay I discuss Carrie Mae Weems's *Kitchen Table Series* (1990) as an intertextual performative storytelling piece that questions structures of knowledge through an interrogation of the documentary form, and challenges discourses of power with its intervention in identity politics. Her twenty 69.2 x 69.2cm gelatin silver prints, which include three triptychs, tell a monochrome photostory of a failed romance that sees the female protagonist returned to a state of equilibrium at the end of the narrative. The photographs are interrupted unevenly by fourteen 27.9 x 27.9cm text panel screenprints which elaborate the narrative articulated in the photographs.¹ Weems sets the stage at her own kitchen table, performing as director, photographer, costume designer and lead, making of her table an intimate meeting ground where exchanges take place, and of her kitchen a space in which social worlds can be explored. Weems's lens remains angled at eye-level medium shot throughout the photostory, allowing us to assume the role of silent guests at her table. We participate in the story from a point-of-view perspective, witnessing at close hand the relationship and power dynamics between the protagonist and her lover, family, daughter and her friends. Reading the text panels alongside the photographs, we notice that their narratives misalign in places. And as we delve deeper into the interiors of the characters' consciousness through the third person narrator – at times omniscient, at others limited to one character's stream of consciousness – we become aware of the potentialities and limitations of images and text as chroniclers and we consider how exterior socio-political constructs are played out in the everyday interior. Whilst Weems's narrative is fiction – indeed *because* it is fiction – I hold it up as an example of the approaches that

¹ See Appendix I, p. 19.

photographers were developing in response to the critiques of documentary that had been taking place since before the 1970s.²

Taking black feminist perspectives, with particular reference to the work of Campt, Spillers and Wynter,³ I explore how far we can perceive moments of resistance, tension and invention in the exchange between pictorial and textual narratives. These perspectives draw on tenses of the past, present and future, and I discuss how Weems's myth-making can be seen as a form of intervention which draws on a historical past to negotiate a black futurity through its performance and representation of the black body. Because of the limitations of space in this essay, my analysis focusses on the questions that arise at the intersection of race, gender and motherhood. I also point to Gilroy's work on the aesthetic of diaspora music to comment on how Weems's song motif points to a history of music as a source of collective resistance.

Weems's work in documentary photography followed in the spirit of the Harlem Renaissance, whose artists sought to document and project their experiences onto the public consciousness in their own style.⁴ Roy DeCavara, a key influence on Weems,⁵ pursued an ideological and aesthetic approach to documentary which

² Edwards, S., in 'The Jo Spence Archive and Memorial Library: a workshop', <https://backdoorbroadcasting.net/2017/05/the-jo-spence-archive-and-memorial-library-a-workshop/> (accessed 23 October 2018); Company, D., (ed.), *Art and Photography*, (New York: Phaidon, 2003).

³ Campt, T. M., *Listening to Images*, (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2017); Spillers, H., J., 'Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book', in *Diacritics*, Vol. 17, No. 2, Culture and Countermemory: The "American" Connection, (Summer, 1987), pp. 64-81; Wynter, S., 'Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom. Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation – An Argument', in *CR: The New Centennial Review*, (Michigan State University Press), Vol. 3, No. 3, (Fall, 2003), pp. 257-337.

⁴ Golden, T., Willis, D., Finley, C., and Alexander, E., (contributors), *Harlem. A Century in Images*, (New York: Skira Rizzoli in association with Studio Museum Harlem, 2010).

⁵ Bey, D., and Weems, C., M., 'Carrie Mae Weems', in *BOMB*, No. 108, (Summer, 2009), pp. 60-67.

centred on “creative expression” rather than “sociological statement”.⁶ Even though Weems’s earlier *Family Pictures and Stories* (1981-1982) turns the gaze inward accordingly, capturing candid expressions of her family as a document of the experiences of black family life in America, it is in her later *Kitchen Table Series* that we see a shift from documentary storytelling as proof to a conceptualism which explores the blurred lines between fact, fiction and truth through its merging of photographs and text, something which DeCavara and Langston Hughes had experimented with in their 1955 narrative of Harlem life, *The Sweet Flypaper of Life*. Their collaboration was as much about documenting black life as it was about exploring the affects of intertextuality,⁷ something Weems can be seen to be exploring in her piece.

Wallis argues that, ‘[documentary] photography [is] an agreed-upon fiction combining the aesthetic, the political, and the social’.⁸ For him, Weems’s work interrogates the documentary form by playing with its conventions, i.e., determining a subject to photograph, framing, selecting and ordering scenes, and including a textual account that anchors or re/frames the meanings of its images. Company explains that photography’s moment of modernism lies in its conceptual auto-critique – its holding up a mirror to itself in order to probe how the masses read photography’s language of representation.⁹ Although Weems’s work is performance-based, her photographs go further than serving as traces of an act or happening. They are staged to interrogate the inherent fictional nature of documentary through their own myth-making. Formally, Weems’s decisions to use a real setting; to employ

⁶ O’Hagan, S., ‘The Sweet Flypaper of Life by Roy DeCarava and Langston Hughes – review’, in *The Guardian*, online:

<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/sep/30/sweet-flypaper-of-life-roy-decarava-langston-hughes-review> (accessed 27 December).

⁷ Weiner, S., ‘Narrating Photography in “The Sweet Flypaper of Life”’, in *MELUS*, Vol. 37, No. 1, *Reading, Writing, and Recognition*, (Spring, 2012), pp. 155-176.

⁸ Wallis, B., ‘Questioning Documentary’, in *Aperture*, No. 112, *Storyteller* (Fall, 1988), p. 60.

⁹ Company, *Art and Photography*.

the kitchen ceiling lamp as the sole light source; to draw on real neighbours and acquaintances to play characters; and to seat her viewers at the table, altogether create an aesthetic akin to an over-the-shoulder reportage style. And here 'the Encounter, the Real'¹⁰ lies in the representation of black subjects. Her textual narrative extends the meanings of these seemingly intimate scenes, driving them into wider socio-political contexts, and commenting through her characters, on the power struggles and tensions that can erupt within socially-configured structures. Furthermore, by structuring the visual and textual narratives in sometimes divergent and intersecting directions, Weems creates schisms, making us aware through these jolts, of the constructed nature of narratives, and challenging the truth of photography's storytelling.

If we depart from the supposal that whilst this work nods to autobiography, it is not fully autobiographical, as both Ards and Edwards have suggested,¹¹ then it is worth exploring the debates which influenced Weems's shaping of her protagonist.¹² Mulvey's 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', published fifteen years before *Kitchen Table Series*, had by this time become an integral part of feminist critical discourse, raising questions around the ways film reinforces the socially-inculcated positioning of woman as passive object to the male's active gaze. In her essay, she talks about two structures of looking: one is a sexual pleasure and comes through sight; the other is tied up with the ego, and comes from a recognition of one's likeness and a corresponding fascination with the character on the screen. She

¹⁰ Barthes, R., *Camera Lucida*, (London: Vintage, 2000), p. 4.

¹¹ Ards, A., 'Carrie Mae Weems: The Muse and Her Muses' in Lydenberg, R., and Anderson, A. (eds.), *Carrie Mae Weems. Strategies of Engagement*, (USA: University of Chicago Press, 2018), p. 59; Edwards, A., 'Scenes of the Flesh: Thinking-Feeling Carrie Mae Weems's Kitchen Table Series Twenty-Five Years On', in *Carrie Mae Weems. Kitchen Table Series*, (Bologna, Italy: Damiani, 2017), p. 9.

¹² Weems, C., M., 'SFMOMA, Artcast Episode: From the Archives: Carrie Mae Weems Artist Talk', on Soundcloud: <https://soundcloud.com/sfmoma/artcast-episode-from-the-archives-carrie-mae-weems-artist-talk> (accessed 20 December 2018).

describes an inward-looking and ‘hermetically-sealed’¹³ cinematic world played out on film, one which is indifferent to the voyeuristic audience and ultimately she calls for radical alternatives to the mainstream codes of Hollywood. Weems seems to address Mulvey’s concerns in *Kitchen Table Series*. She breaks the fourth wall, inviting the audience to her protagonist’s table who meets us with a direct gaze, inviting us into a mutual exchange. Not only does this shift the voyeuristic power away from the audience’s lap, it also means that the narcissistic structure of looking that comes from identification with Weems’s protagonist, belongs to the black female audience member: she is *the* most pleased viewer of this narrative. The protagonist’s direct gaze occurs twice in the narrative – in fig. 1 when we meet her as a woman sitting confidently in her sexuality, and again in fig. 22 after she regains her power and sense of self-identity, which are momentarily thwarted by the breakdown of her relationship. No other character gazes back at us. In *Kitchen Table Series* Weems’s radicalism comes from the positioning of both her character and her audience.

Weems’s visual tableaux offer an affirmative response to Mulvey’s calls also by virtue of their being photographs – staged stills can be held up to critique in a way that moving scenes from films cannot.¹⁴ In its published form, her work allows a haptic response to be reiterated in its handling, giving the audience another sense of participation and control over the ways and order in which the narratives are read, including entirely separately from each other, as standalone stories.¹⁵ Unlike Mulvey’s passive voyeurs, Weems’s narrative has to be activated and interacted with by its readers in their turning of its pages and their lingering on details in the

¹³ Mulvey, L., ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’, in Braudy, L., and Cohen, M., (eds.), *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 835.

¹⁴ Company, *Art and Photography*, p. 36.

¹⁵ Weems, C., M., ‘SFMOMA, Artcast Episode: From the Archives: Carrie Mae Weems Artist Talk’, *Soundcloud*: <https://soundcloud.com/sfmoma/artcast-episode-from-the-archives-carrie-mae-weems-artist-talk> (accessed 20 December 2018).

photographs. Regardless of whether the photographic and textual narratives are read in unison or separately, the story's dénouement gives us a woman who has reclaimed her dominion at the head of her table, and her solitaire-playing single status (fig. 28) '[isn't] nobody's business' (fig. 27). This resolution, unlike those found in Hollywood films by Mulvey, ultimately affirms that Weems's protagonist (read "woman") cannot be controlled and possessed by the male character (read "man").

As mentioned earlier, the Harlem Renaissance and a black cultural aesthetic was pertinent to Weems's work. Ards talks about the impact that the 1970s renaissance of black women writers and novelists had on Weems's thinking as an artist.¹⁶ The womanist revival of folklorist, Zora Neale Hurston's 1937 *Their Eyes Were Watching God* provided a powerful blueprint for Weems in developing a black folkloric voice through which her experiences could be expressed.¹⁷ We hear this in Weems's writing style – in its use of internal rhyme and its rhythm, its phonetic spellings and the idiomatic expressions which assert an African American dialect. Walker speaks of Hurston's writing as providing 'racial health; a sense of black people as complete, complex, *undiminished* human beings [emphasis hers].'¹⁸ Her view, that artists have a responsibility to perpetuate empowering histories, is centred on Hurston when she says, '[emphases hers] *We are a people. A people do not throw their geniuses away. And if they are thrown away, it is our duty as artists and as witnesses for the future to collect them again for the sake of our children*'.¹⁹ Ards draws parallels between the protagonist in Hurston's *Their Eyes* and Weems's *Kitchen Table* character. But there are also cross-overs between the character we meet at Weems's table and Walker's description of Hurston herself: 'good-looking, sexy...She would go anywhere she had to go...she would light up a fag – which wasn't done by ladies then...she tended to marry or not marry men but enjoyed them anyway...she talked

¹⁶ Ards, 'The Muse and Her Muses', p. 57.

¹⁷ Ards, 'The Muse and Her Muses'.

¹⁸ Walker, A., *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens. Womanist Prose*, (London: Phoenix, 2005), pp. 85-86.

¹⁹ Walker, *In Search*, p. 92.

too much'.²⁰ Weems's characterisation, evident in her gestures and in the way 'she'd been pickin em up and layin em down, moving to the next town' (fig. 2), one who 'felt monogamy...was a system based on private property' (fig. 6) and whose lover 'accused her of being...too wild', disapproving of her 'insistent demand that everything...be viewed politically' (fig. 8), whether drawn from historical literary figures or imagined ones, presents an independent, politically-engaged subject who asserts herself but who also stumbles. She has to negotiate her position in the architecture of social relationships not only in the dynamics of her romantic relationship but by tapping in to other social hierarchies and structures for support (figs. 11, 12 and 14). Weems's piece speaks to Hurston's, whose narrative also positions black characters as normative and tells a story of failed relationships. Both explore power and vulnerability in their crafting of an imperfect yet empowering resolution for their female protagonists.

Weems's approach to representation then, in light of feminist and womanist discourses, can be understood as a form of intervention in a cultural landscape whose representations of the black body are deemed wanting. Weems uses her body to stand for herself or for anyone else: 'she is a black woman leading me through the trauma of history...she is engaged with the world around her; she's engaged with history; she's engaged with looking, with *being* [emphasis her own].'²¹

For Wynter the intellectual act of forming a self-definition wields power.²² So presumably, it must also carry a responsibility. Any performance aimed at redressing the representational void for the black female subject risks the assumption that there exists a common black female identity (take Walker's definition of womanist,

²⁰ Walker, *In Search*, pp. 88-89.

²¹ Bey, 'Carrie Mae Weems', p. 66.

²² Wynter, S., 'Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom. Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation – An Argument', in *CR: The New Centennial Review*, (Michigan State University Press), Vol. 3, No. 3, (Fall, 2003), pp. 257-337.

for example).²³ If a presumed universality takes hold, it is arguably as limiting as it is liberating. More problematically, it operates in a similar way to that which Wynter describes as modernity's lynchpin myth: the ethnicity complex which over-represents the western Man as Human, and systematically categorises the non-western as Other.²⁴ The perspectives I have used in reading Weems's piece share similar methodologies, each rooting their inquiry in modernity's history of slavery and colonisation. In so doing, they can be said to delimit black cultural identity to this chapter of history. However, these decolonial approaches are reflexive. They pose formative questions and call for invention. Their proposal, that the history of modernity is incomplete, seeks to delve into its past in order to explore alternative possibilities that don't yet exist. This diagnostic and anticipatory approach, rather than assuming a fixed common identity, aspires to explore. This is not to argue that the responsibility that comes with self-definition is nullified. But to suggest that there is an inherent benefit to a temporal hindsight which draws on a historical (factual, albeit invented) past to unpick present conditions in order to intervene in humanity's futures. Within this unsettled discourse, Weems's work bears potentialities. Because it is a piece of fiction, it masks the intellectual act of self-definition by not purporting to be documentary fact but is nonetheless capable of criticality. As a timeless love story it can be projected endlessly into a future public consciousness, free from the burden of proof, yet still carrying forward truths in its comments on the human condition; its interrogation of the social constructs of modern societies; and its guiding black aesthetic and voice – which stands for the human in as valid a way as any other constructed racial category.²⁵

In her work on identification and documentary photographs of African and diaspora subjects, Camppt proposes listening as an intervention. Central to her approach is a

²³ See Appendix II, p. 34.

²⁴ Wynter, 'Unsettling the Coloniality', p. 267.

²⁵ Interestingly, *Kitchen Table Series* was published in its entirety for the first time in 2017, twenty-six years after being made – during the Trump administration and Black Lives Matter[ing].

grammar (*the future real conditional*) which refers to ‘that which will have had to happen’ for a black futurity to materialise.²⁶ Campt listens for Barthes’s punctum.²⁷ She searches for the inaudible everyday practices of rupture that express themselves as acts of quiet refusal. For her, these performances are played out in the expressions of tension in the muscles – the flesh – of sitters. To aid her listening, Campt draws on the historical, socio-political and cultural contexts of the images, to move closer to the event of the photograph, and attempts to disrupt the control with which the images are set up, finding in them affirmations of defiance and dignity – acts of empowerment. In *Kitchen Table Series*, Weems is subject and author. She rehearses her photographs, fine-tuning her gestures to articulate those expressions of defiance, dignity and empowerment, purposely staging and framing the black female subject’s “identification” photographs – a performance that Campt might view as ‘creat[ing] one’s own future as a practice of survival’.²⁸ To move her audience closer to the event of her photographs, Weems deploys a narrator whose voice unfolds the ‘complex forces that surround[...] and produce[...] [the stasis]’²⁹ we see performed in the flesh. And apart from any bodily tensions we perceive in the photographs, our encounter with the visual and textual narratives as they unravel asynchronously, produces an additional articulation of rupture.

In the first two photographs (figs. 1 and 4) we meet a sexy woman who is confident in her own identity. Her gaze in fig. 1, fixed in the centre of the frame, becomes our focal point and we notice a suggestive smile playing on her lips. The identity of her lover, who stands behind her leaning over her shoulder for an embrace, is concealed by his hat – this anonymous suited figure could stand for any man. Even though the protagonist has a mirror in front of her, she doesn’t search for herself in its reflection; she prefers to commune with us, allowing us to search for ourselves in

²⁶ Campt, *Listening to Images*, p. 17.

²⁷ Barthes, *Camera Lucida*.

²⁸ Campt, *Listening to Images*, p. 114.

²⁹ Campt, *Listening to Images*, p. 52.

her gaze instead. The second photograph attaches a political backdrop to the stage with a Malcolm X poster now hanging on the kitchen wall. This scene, which vibrates not only with politics but sexual tension, and the noise of a cluttered table, a guarded game of cards, and the dense cigarette smoke which hangs in the air between the lovers, contrasts heavily with the next scene of domesticity (fig. 5). Here, the protagonist is displaced from her seat, performing as subservient caregiver. With Malcolm X having been replaced by a framed piece reminiscent of a Van Gogh's *Sunflowers* painting, we seem to have moved backwards to an earlier (pre-emancipatory) moment of modernity being articulated through the history of art. The man devours his lobster, whilst the now self-sacrificing protagonist's food and wine remain untouched. Even though she is holding a cigarette, no smoke hangs in the air this time, only a caged bird in the corner.

Until this point, the images and text meet congruently, each informing the reading of the other. From fig. 6 onwards, they begin to jar discordantly leaving gaps in our comprehension, out of which spring questions. Weems's narrator reveals arguments between the lovers, along with the protagonist's radical views on monogamy, motherhood and gender equality (across figs. 6, 8, 9, 15 and 19) long after the relationship has broken down, making the muscular tensions we perceive in the first triptych (fig. 7, which is also the last time we see the man) a foreshadowing of what is to come for their relationship. Kirsh and Sterling argue that the man's narrative is the best example of disjuncture between photographic and textual storytelling because he lingers in the text for much longer than the photographs.³⁰ Whilst this is inarguable, there is a more perplexing vibration to be heard in the abstruseness of the daughter's story. If we adopt Camp's counterintuitive approach (and because the story is not about motherhood) then it is the partitioned, peripheral mother-daughter narrative that carries the lowest hums whose tensions bear closer listening to. It is perhaps here that we can perceive the radical female social subject 'gaining

³⁰ Kirsh, A., and Sterling, S., F., *Carrie Mae Weems*, (Washington D.C.: National Museum of Women in the Arts, 1993).

the *insurgent* ground [emphasis hers]' that Spillers argues is necessary for the black woman to make a space for her body and flesh.³¹

Spillers' argument for invention returns to the beginning of the Atlantic Slave Trade, at the 'violent formation of the modern African consciousness'.³² Her work centres on the black woman's flesh as she unpicks the symbolic orders that held her body captive. Amongst other things, Spillers considers the gendered notions of female subject-positioning to motherhood, one that feminists have sought to challenge and, to some extent break down. Butler's work on performativity posits that an 'interior essence' of gender is manufactured through repeated, ritualised, performed acts that become naturalised in the context of the body.³³ We see such performances in figs. 5 and 7. Butler goes on to say that at the intersection of feminism and other cultural horizons (in our case, the experience of modernity shared by diaspora populations who recall a shared past in the present black Atlantic³⁴), any theorisation of gender demands a translation whose success is uncertain.³⁵ Spillers argues that in the case of the African American woman, the question of gendering and motherhood still remains a deeply unresolved puzzle. Her analysis of historical slave narratives reveal that the captive woman is deemed worthless unless she can produce offspring. They are stock for her captor: children who "belong" to neither the mother nor the biological father, whether he be slave or enslaver, although the latter "possesses" them. Spillers infers that the separation of children from their mothers disrupts a seemingly maternal function which enables children to cultivate kinship bonds. Instead their lives become defined by social ambiguity and chaos.³⁶ The captive female body loses the 'blood rite/right' of motherhood in a

³¹ Spillers, 'Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe', pp. 64-81.

³² Spillers, 'Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe', p. 68.

³³ Butler, J., *Gender Trouble*, (New York and London: 2007), p. xv.

³⁴ Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*.

³⁵ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, pp. x-xv.

³⁶ Spillers, 'Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe', p. 69.

performativity that makes of her body a site of commercial exchange.³⁷

Problematically for feminist discourse, if the black woman's reproductive body is the source of her value and she is simultaneously denied a parental role, the historical separations of mother from child aligns motherhood and female gendering and ungendering in what appears to be the same language as that of feminism. Being both mother and mother-dispossessed positions the black woman outside the traditional discourse of female gender. As Weaver asserts, the black female body is Weems's starting point in her explorations of power, but unlike Golden's views that Weems uses her images and texts to answer questions,³⁸ I would argue that from a black feminist perspective, some of these issues are too big to be resolved easily, and it is through listening to the mother-daughter frequencies in Weems's work that we might uncover questions – which are more instrumental in the formation of alternative futures than are answers.

The first sign of offspring in *Kitchen Table Series* comes in fig. 8, in the shape of an indeterminate child character who is introduced to us fleetingly as 'the kid'. They are given no further elucidation. From this cursory and enigmatic encounter, we cannot ascertain anything conclusive about the function of this character in the narrative. As the story advances, we could be forgiven for entirely forgetting about the existence of this character whilst arguments between the lovers continue to unfold, as do scenes of solace with friends, counsel from the protagonist's mother, and her act of infidelity which signals 'the end of things' (fig. 15). Already a young adolescent by the time the daughter is revealed to us in fig. 16, the photograph and triptych that follow (fig. 17) depict the mother performing as guide and disciplinarian. In their last photograph together, a sense of balance is created by a pyramidal composition in which we see the daughter playing with friends around the table with Weems at its head (fig. 18). The juxtaposition of dynamic motion in the

³⁷ Spillers, 'Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe', pp. 74-75.

³⁸ Weaver, A., M., 'Carrie Mae Weems: History and Dreams', in *Aperture*, No. 197 (Winter, 2009), pp. 24-29.

girls' blurred figures with Weems's stasis marks her figure out as the focal point; one whose stillness and poise, in contrast to the other figures implies stability and also a separateness. Her fingertips rest on the sides of her face as she gazes intently at her daughter with an absorbed expression that suggests tenderness and concern. We perceive here an articulation of recognition or acknowledgement. The ensuing text panel extends our reading of Weems's gaze, revealing a tension between the love she feels for her child and the burden of societal expectations on the mother figure, whose 'duty' feels like a 'punishment' (fig. 19). She longs to lighten her load. The daughter's stream of consciousness in text panel 11 (fig.21) continues this discourse on socialisation through its list of didactic nursery rhymes, children's songs, games, books and superstitious adage that instruct on gendered behaviour, the nuclear family and obedience. The ironic tone of the narrative voice in this panel implies that this young character is aware of these cultural constructs and she offers her critique on their signification, rejecting most of it. Weems's characterisation hands down to the daughter a sense of intellectual independence not unlike her mother's, but her detachment from the narrative arc is felt once again as the page bearing her text is turned, and she is mentioned only once more in passing – again as 'the kid' (fig. 23). The narrative returns to the trials facing the couple, and once their relationship is over, the last text panel tells us, 'being alone again naturally wasn't a problem'. Our protagonist is content to be 'in her solitude' (fig. 27). Weems's description here implies that the daughter's inconspicuous existence is negligible in the mother's sense of kindred relations: she functions as a mother, but cannot take up the maternal role.

When the daughter enters the frame briefly, her character does not drive the narrative forward. If anything, her unexpected entrance interrupts it. And yet she participates in its social commentary. In view of Campt's and Spillers' work, it is interesting to consider this character as a performance of the low frequency reverberation which hums of historical mother-child separation. The narrative structure presents a disunited parent to child relationship which connotes a lack of

social cohesion, or Spillers' social ambiguity, but there is also something else in the child's narrative. Her ironic commentary on the children's texts might be read as illustrative of the displacement she experiences within her own family and lack of "normative" socialisation. Alternatively it could be a sign of agency, which sees her choosing to author her own narratives by turning the ones handed to her by society over for critique. By not extending the child's narrative any further, Weems leaves these unsettled ideas in the air, and in so doing, creates more spaces for potentialities to be explored around the gendered black female body. At the end of the story both female characters remain isolated in certain ways, but they also display a level of control over their self-identity.

There is another more remedial sound used throughout Weems's piece: the motif of music, or more accurately, song titles. Weems's adult characters speak through songs: Otis Redding's *Try a Little Tenderness*, Jimmy Cliff's *Many Rivers to Cross*, Dizzy Gillespie's *Night in Tunisia*, Sam Cooke's *A Change is Gonna Come*, Diana Ross's *Reach Out and Touch*, The Shirelles's *Mamma Said*, James Brown's *This is a Man's World*, Louisiana Red's *Freight Train to Ride*, to name a few. Gilroy's work on the development of black Atlantic modernisms is a useful lens from which to consider the ways Weems's references to songs speak of collective resistance. He draws links between diaspora music and slavery in its relationship to the body. On the plantations, music and dance were shared languages which enabled communication, regrouping and liberation. He argues that these oral structures have shaped the diaspora aesthetic.³⁹

Gilroy talks about the distinctive components of black communication that we see through jazz, rhythm and blues, and soul music which he sees as transformative. Bey hears the blues rising from the photograph in fig. 5. For him, it is in the gesture of the man eating his lobster – which he holds like a harmonica – that we recognise the

³⁹ Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*.

imprint of the black aesthetic on this German instrument, originally built to speak a different musical language but here sounding a black vernacular in the distinct pitches and wistful sounds that we associate with the blues.⁴⁰ These syncopations which ‘animate the basic desires – to be free and to be oneself’⁴¹ are played out in the interaction between the man’s body and his lobster, and between the songs Weems lists and our recognition of their sounds. By hearing these familiar songs in our minds as we read their titles and lyrics in Weems’s text, we not only become participants in a collective experience of ‘the phatic and the ineffable’,⁴² but we perceive in her piece an expression of the bonds that span not just kinship ties but national and geographical boundaries across the black Atlantic. These sonic networks juxtapose the jarring social detachment of motherhood articulated through Weems’s scattered narrative structure. It is in this intertextual interplay of coherence and chaos that we find a diaspora double consciousness that for Gilroy and Adusei-Poku enriches our understanding of modernity.⁴³

Chambers talks about Weems’s work as focussing ‘unflinchingly on...racial narratives’⁴⁴ but this description confines *Kitchen Table Series* to a story about race, and also delimits it to the present tense. Approaching it from black feminist diaspora thought, we hear this narrative as a necessary counter-balance to modernity’s Eurocentric, male, race myth. Her fiction does not seek to talk about race per se, but neither to annul it. Instead, its form can be seen as a pre-requisite for the

⁴⁰ Kelsey, R., Hall, K., Tillet, S., Bey, D., and Blessing, J., (contributors), ‘Vision and Justice: Around the Kitchen Table’, *Aperture*, online blog: <https://aperture.org/blog/vision-justice-around-kitchen-table/> (accessed 18 December 2018).

⁴¹ Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*. p. 76.

⁴² Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, p. 73.

⁴³ Adusei-Poku, N., ‘Post-Post-Black?’, *Nka Journal of Contemporary African Art*, No. 38-39, (November 2016), pp. 80-89.

⁴⁴ Chambers, E., ‘Carrie Mae Weems’, from Eddie Chamber’s website <http://www.eddiechambers.com/art-monthly/carrie-mae-weems/> (accessed 18 December 2018).

‘fundamental [re]arrangements of knowledge’,⁴⁵ as that which will have had to happen before we can escape the Modern Western Man and move ‘Towards the Human’.⁴⁶

(5200 words)

Student ID: 13120326

⁴⁵ Foucault, M., *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of The Human Sciences*, (London: Routledge Classics, 2002).

⁴⁶ Wynter, S., ‘Unsettling the Coloniality’, pp. 257-337.

Bibliography

Adusei-Poku, N., 'Post-Post-Black?', *Nka Journal of Contemporary African Art*, No. 38-39, (November 2016), pp. 80-89

Andreasson, K., 'Carrie Mae Weems' Best Photograph: Lobster Dinner at the Kitchen Table', from *The Guardian*, online, 30 October 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2014/oct/30/carrie-mae-weems-best-photograph> (accessed 18 December 2018)

Ards, A., 'Carrie Mae Weems: The Muse and Her Muses' in Lydenberg, R., and Anderson, A. (eds.), *Carrie Mae Weems. Strategies of Engagement*, (USA: University of Chicago Press, 2018)

Barthes, R., *Camera Lucida*, (London: Vintage, 2000)

Bey, D., and Weems, C., M., 'Carrie Mae Weems', in *BOMB*, No. 108, (Summer, 2009), pp. 60-67

Butler, J., *Gender Trouble*, (New York and London: 2007)

Campany, D., (ed.), *Art and Photography*, (New York: Phaidon, 2003)

Campt, T. M., *Listening to Images*, (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2017)

Chambers, E., 'Carrie Mae Weems', from Eddie Chamber's website <http://www.eddiechambers.com/art-monthly/carrie-mae-weems/> (accessed 18 December 2018)

Edwards, A., 'Scenes of the Flesh: Thinking-Feeling Carrie Mae Weems's Kitchen Table Series Twenty-Five Years On', in *Carrie Mae Weems. Kitchen Table Series*, (Bologna, Italy: Damiani, 2017), pp. 9-15

Edwards, S., talking about documentary in 'The Jo Spence Archive and Memorial Library: a workshop', <https://backdoorbroadcasting.net/2017/05/the-jo-spence-archive-and-memorial-library-a-workshop/> (accessed 23 October 2018)

Foucault, M., *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of The Human Sciences*, (London: Routledge Classics, 2002)

Gilroy, P., *The Black Atlantic. Modernity and Double Consciousness*, (London: Verso, 1993)

Golden, T., Willis, D., Finley, C., and Alexander, E., (contributors), *Harlem. A Century in Images*, (New York: Skira Rizzoli in association with Studio Museum Harlem, 2010)

Hurston, Z. N., *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, (New York: Virago Modern Classics, 2018)

Kelsey, R., Hall, K., Tillet, S., Bey, D., and Blessing, J., (contributors), 'Vision and Justice: Around the Kitchen Table', *Aperture*, online blog: <https://aperture.org/blog/vision-justice-around-kitchen-table/> (accessed 18 December 2018)

Kirsh, A., and Sterling, S., F., *Carrie Mae Weems*, (Washington D.C.: National Museum of Women in the Arts, 1993)

Lydenberg, R., and Anderson, A. (eds.), *Carrie Mae Weems Strategies of Engagement*, (USA: University of Chicago Press, 2018)

Mulvey, L., 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', in Braudy, L., and Cohen, M., (eds.), *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 833-844

O'Hagan, S., 'The Sweet Flypaper of Life by Roy DeCarava and Langston Hughes – review', in *The Guardian*, online: <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/sep/30/sweet-flypaper-of-life-roy-decarava-langston-hughes-review> (accessed 27 December)

Spillers, H., J., 'Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book', in *Diacritics*, Vol. 17, No. 2, Culture and Counteremory: The "American" Connection, (Summer, 1987), pp. 64-81

Stange, M., 'Carrie Mae Weems: Guide to Circumstances Seldom Seen', in Lydenberg, R., and Anderson, A. (eds.), *Carrie Mae Weems. Strategies of Engagement*, (USA: University of Chicago Press, 2018)

Walker, A., *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens. Womanist Prose*, (London: Phoenix, 2005)

Wallis, B., 'Questioning Documentary', in *Aperture*, No. 112, Storyteller (Fall, 1988), pp. 60-71

Weaver, A., M., 'Carrie Mae Weems: History and Dreams', in *Aperture*, No. 197 (Winter, 2009), pp. 24-29

Weems, C., M., 'National Gallery of Art. Carrie Mae Weems: Kitchen Table Series', on *Soundcloud*: <https://soundcloud.com/nationalgalleryofart/carrie-mae-weems-kitchen-table-series> (accessed 19 December 2018)

Weems, C., M., 'SFMOMA, Artcast Episode: From the Archives: Carrie Mae Weems Artist Talk', on *Soundcloud*: <https://soundcloud.com/sfmoma/artcast-episode-from-the-archives-carrie-mae-weems-artist-talk> (accessed 20 December 2018)

Weiner, S., 'Narrating Photography in "The Sweet Flypaper of Life"', in *MELUS*, Vol. 37, No. 1, *Reading, Writing, and Recognition*, (Spring, 2012), pp. 155-176

Wynter, S., 'Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom. Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation – An Argument', in *CR: The New Centennial Review*, (Michigan State University Press), Vol. 3, No. 3, (Fall, 2003), pp. 257-337

Appendix I: Carrie Mae Weems, *Kitchen Table Series*, 1990



Fig. 1 *Untitled (Man and mirror)*

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 him 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.

Fig. 2 Text panel 1

Looking her up, down, sideways he said, "So tell me baby what do you know about this great big world of ours?" Smiling she said, "Not a damn thang sugar. I don't mind telling you my life's not been sheltered from the cold and I've not always seen the forest or smelled the coffee, played mamma 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.

Fig. 3 Text panel 2



Fig. 4 *Untitled (Man smoking)*



Fig. 5 *Untitled (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.

Fig. 6 Text panel 3



Fig. 7 *Untitled (Man reading newspaper), Triptych*

In their daily life together trouble lurked. He said she was much too domineering. He didn't mind a woman speaking her mind, but hey, she was taking it a tad too far. Accused her of talking too loudly, being a little too wild in public places. No matter what the subject, she had to get her two cents in, ruined dinner parties with her insistent demand that everything – the flowers on the table – be viewed politically. He was tired of that base and superstructure white-boy-book-shit! Arguing til blue in the face bout them theories. Couldn't be cooled or back-down just once. Naw!! She had to have the last word, had to be right. Plus she was always in the streets, running. Oh, and the way she was dealing with the kid! He didn't dig it at all. Something had to give.

Fig. 8 Text panel 4

She insisted that what he called domineering was a jacket being forced on her because he couldn't stand the thought of the inevitable shift in the balance of power. She assured him that the object of her task was not to control him, but out of necessity – freedom being the appreciation of necessity – to control herself. She went on to tell him that in the face of the daily force she understood his misgivings. But they were in a 50-50 thing. Equals. She wasn't about to succumb to standards of tradition which denied her a rightful place or voice, period. She was trying to be a good woman, a compadre, a pal, a living-doll and she was working. How could he ask for more!! She was really gettin tired of him talkin out of both sides of his mouth about the kinda woman he wanted. Fish or cut bait.

Fig. 9 Text panel 5



Fig. 10 *Untitled (Woman and phone)*



Fig. 11 *Untitled (Woman with friends)*, Triptych



Fig. 12 *Untitled (Woman brushing hair)*

She was a woman socially involved, loved to run her mouth, to talk things through. He was a man socially involved, who thought actions spoke louder than words. A thin line of difference was beginning to show itself, but they didn't want to lose this dream, so kept at it. Plus the loving was worth it. He liked his coffee in the morning, she was crazy about her tea at night and every time they did that wang-dang-doodle the earth moved. He discovered tremendous tenderness in her love, thought the sun rose and set in her eyes, said her butt was like butter. Started calling her butter-cup. She found in the mountains, valleys and the wide expanse of his chest: power, solace, and licked him like candy. She called him candy-daddy.

Fig. 13 Text panel 6

Seeking clarity and purpose, she spoke about the problems with her
momma who said, "There's a difference between men and women. I
can't tell ya what to do. But I can tell you that I sided with men so long
I forgot women had a side. Truth slapped me so hard up-side my head,
I cried for days, got so I couldn't wash my own behind. Shonuff blue.
Biggest fool in the world. Turning my back on friends for a piece of
man. Oh sure, I've had a man or two – I mean with a capital "M" –
but like a good friend, hard to come by. But look, ya got a good man,
man puts up with mo a yo mess than the law allows. If he loves ya, ya
best take yo behind home, drop them guns on the floor and work it
out. Ya gotta give a little to get a little, that's the story of life."

Fig. 14 Text panel 7

He felt her demands for more than he could presently give would cause
her to lose a good thing. She felt his lack of compromises around her
simple needs would soon have her singing,

I love you Porgy,
don't let him take me,
don't let him handle me
with his hot hands.
If you can keep me, I
wants to stay here
with you forever and
I'll be glad.

She went on a little run with a friend, and when they got back her
girlfriend told what she had did. He cried big crocodile tears at the
thought of another mule in his stall. So hurt by her infidelity, he felt
Frankie and Johnny might have to be played out for real. This was the
beginning and the end of things.

Fig. 15 Text panel 8



Fig. 16 *Untitled (Woman and daughter with makeup)*



Fig. 17 *Untitled (Woman with daughter), Triptych*



Fig. 18 *Untitled (Woman and daughter with children)*

Neither knew with certainty what the future held. It could be only a paper moon hanging over a cardboard sea, but they both said, "It wouldn't be make-believe, if you believed in me."

He wanted children. She didn't. At the height of their love a child was born. Her sisters thought the world of their children. Noting their little feats as they stumbled, teetered and stood. 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!!' Oh yeah, she loved the kid, she was responsible, but took no deep pleasure in motherhood, it caused deflection from her own immediate desires, which pissed her off. Ha. A woman's duty! Ha! A punishment for Eve's sin was more like it. Ha.

Fig. 19 Text panel 9

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 know 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 hear 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.

Fig. 20 Text panel 10

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 H O T spelled more than hot, like she was little Sally Walker, and not Mary with blearing 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 momma'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 bing the best at jacks didn't mean dooty-squat. She felt like this mommy/daddy stuff was a remake of jack and jill.

Fig. 21 Text panel 11



Fig. 22 *Untitled (Woman standing alone)*

She was working, making long money, becoming what he called 'bourgie,' he wasn't working and this was truly messing with his mind. He was starting to feel like a Black man wasn't supposed to have nothing, like some kind of conspiracy was being played out and he was the fall guy, like the mission was impossible like it ain't a man's world, like just cause she was working and making so much dough, she was getting to where she didn't love him no mo, like he had bad luck, like he didn't have a dream, like he needed a night in Tunisia, like he needed to catch a freight train and ride, like if he felt tomorrow like he did today, come Sunday he'd pack up and make a get-away, like if he stayed, the kid would hate him for sure, like he just might have to contribute to the most confusing day in Harlem, like he had a tomb-stone disposition and grave-yard mind. Like maybe a Black man just wasn't her kind.

Fig. 23 Text panel 12

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 quietly 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.*

Fig. 24 Text panel 13



Fig. 25 *Untitled (Woman feeding bird)*



Fig. 26 *Untitled (Nude)*

In and of itself, being alone again naturally wasn't a problem. But some time had passed. At 38 she was beginning to feel the fullness of her woman self, wanted once again to share it all with a man who could deal with the multitude of her being. But that would have to come later. Presently she was in her solitude, so it was nobody's business what she did.

Sit there and count your fingers.
What can you do?
Oh, girl you're through.
It's time you knew
all you can ever count on
are the rain drops that fall on
little girl blue.

Step on a pin, the pin bends and that's the way the story ends.

Fig. 27 Text panel 14



Fig. 28 *Untitled (Woman playing solitaire)*

Appendix II: Definition of womanist⁴⁷

Womanist 1. From *womanish* (Opp. of “girlish,” i.e., frivolous, irresponsible, not serious.) A black feminist or feminist of colour. From the black folk expression of mothers to female children, “You acting womanish,” i.e., like a woman. Usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous or *wilful* behaviour. Wanting to know more and in greater depth than is considered “good” for one. Interested in grown-up doings. Acting grown up. Being grown up. Interchangeable with another black folk expression: “You trying to be grown.” Responsible. In charge. *Serious*.

2. Also: A woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually. Appreciates and prefers women’s culture, women’s emotional flexibility (values tears as natural counter-balance of laughter), and women’s strength. Sometimes loves individual men, sexually and/or nonsexually. Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male *and* female. Not a separatist, except periodically, for health. Traditionally universalist, as in: “Mama, why are we brown, pink, and yellow, and our cousins are white, beige and black?” Ans.: “Well, you know the coloured race is just like a flower garden, with every colour flower represented.” Traditionally capable, as in: “Mama, I’m walking to Canada and I’m taking you and a bunch of other slaves with me.” Reply: “It wouldn’t be the first time.”

3. Loves music. Loves dance. Loves the moon. *Loves* the Spirit. Loves love and food and roundness. Loves struggle. *Loves* the Folk. Loves herself. *Regardless*.

4. Womanist is to feminist as purple to lavender.

⁴⁷ From Walker, A., *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens. Womanist Prose*, (London: Phoenix, 2005), pp. xi-xii.