

Voice of the Voiceless:
The Project of Black Identity in Carrie Mae Weems's
From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried

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Abstract: Of the pieces shown in the 2016 exhibit “30 Americans” at the Tacoma Art Museum, Carrie Mae Weems's "From here I saw what happened and I cried" (1995-1996) was one of the most impactful. Weems's piece is composed of 33 toned images - with two blue-toned images bookending the other red-toned images - framed in circular mattes with sandblasted text over the glass frame. For this work, Weems re-presents daguerreotypes commissioned by Louis Agassiz in 1850; Each portrait, toned in blood-red, has a sandblasted text overlay that, when put together, presents an American narrative of black identity (the full text is included in the works cited). In this essay, I use Frantz Fanon's “The fact of blackness” to analyze Weems's piece within the context of queer theory. Fanon's theories show the significance of Weems's appropriation of the daguerreotypes – as she attempts to show that the subjects (as well as the black community in America) have been endlessly categorized and victimized and humiliated at the hands of (and for the benefit of) white people. Weems's piece reclaims these identities and narratives imposed on her subjects while at the same time forcing viewers to confront the bloody reality of the black American experience.

Although it does not take up as much physical space or overt emotional space that many of the other pieces do, Carrie Mae Weems's “From here I saw what happened and I cried” (1995-1996) left me with the biggest impression from the 30 Americans exhibit. Weems's piece is composed of 33 toned images – with two blue-toned images bookending the other red-toned images – framed in circular mattes with sandblasted text over the glass frame (Weems, MoMA).

The photos that Weems uses in her piece are re-presented daguerreotypes commissioned by Louis Agassiz in 1850. Agassiz traveled through the American south with a photographer who took portraits of slaves (MoMA). These photos were intended to be used as “visual evidence” of the slaves' racial inferiority to the white population. Further, they were used for a taxonomy of physical types in the slave population (MoMA). Each portrait, toned in blood-red, has a sandblasted text overlay that, when put together, presents a narrative of the black historical

experiences in identity (see references page for full text). At first glance, Weems's piece does not seem to directly relate to issues within Gender and Queer theory; however, the themes within her piece and the story that they tell relates strongly to Frantz Fanon's "The fact of blackness" in that these people's identities were constructed by and for white people. In her piece, Weems forces the viewer to confront the fact that these subjects have been categorized and victimized at the hands of a racist society.

It is important to understand the significance of the themes that Weems employs in her piece. Weems's use of a circular frame, specific tones, text overlays, and the subjects themselves are all vital in understanding the theoretical concepts in Fanon's work. First, the framing of each photo. The circular matte that each red-toned image has seems to suggest the lens of a camera – it is what you would see when looking through the viewfinder of a camera, especially the cameras used when Louis Agassiz found his "evidence." This use of a circular matte directly relates to the original photographs and contextualizes the piece and the subjects for the viewer. It also puts the viewer in the position of the photographer. Instead of just looking at a photo of someone, the viewer is placed into the first-person viewpoint of the photo subject – as if they are watching history through this lens and piece. Weems forces the viewer to confront the history and identity that Anglo-America created for African Americans – more so the viewer's own identity and life experiences shape how they individually experience the piece. Having the images all toned to a blood-red makes the viewer confront the blood that has been shed throughout this Anglo-American narrative of black identities: the history of black people in America is soaked with blood.

Not only is the use of a text overlay on these images significant, but also the way in which this text was placed (as well as what it says, which you may read below). The placement

of the text itself interrupts the observer's view of the art and the photo's subject. In each photo, the viewer is forced to confront not only the visual reality of racism but also the reality of racist identities. The method of text placement – sandblasting – seems to suggest a kind of permanence. The words aren't arbitrary or changing any time, they were moments and stereotypes and continue to be moments and stereotypes today. Sandblasting the text on glass also does not obstruct the subject of the photo. There is a contrast in Weems's piece between the subject and the text but the text does not get in the way of you being able to see the full, original essence, weight, and narrative of the subject in each photo. Rather, the text adds to the viewer's understanding of the subject.

According to Weems herself, her work “has a great deal to do with the breadth of humanity of African Americans...it's an attempt to reposition and reimagine the possibility of women and the possibility of people of color” (TAM). Where the people of color as subjects in the original photos were given an identity – centered on racism and stereotypes – Weems attempts to give them a new voice, especially in regard to reestablishing their dignity and validating their pain by deconstructing the stereotypical identities through her sandblasted text and use of blood-red in her images (Oxford online). Weems has spoken on the re-presenting identities aspects of her piece and said that she hopes this “gives the subject another level of humanity and another level of dignity that was originally missing in the photograph” with its original intent and use (MoMA). There has been some debate in the academic world about Weems's appropriation of the daguerreotypes, mostly in regard to whether Weems respects the “project of identity” of the abused photo subjects (Raymond). In her article on this, Claire Raymond asserts that the way in which Weems uses these photographs to ultimately give a voice

and re-present identities to the subjects does in fact respect the “project of identity” – concepts that can be seen in Fanon’s “The Fact of Blackness”.

In “The Fact of Blackness,” Fanon discusses the “fact” of black identities. He asserts that “blackness” is and has not ever been a self-constructed identity. This identity was pushed onto those that are categorized as black people based on (at the most basic level) appearance – and stereotypes and racial profiling are added on to that once the appearance is established. Fanon argues that the black man is not “the slave...of the idea that others have of [him] but of [his] own appearance.” That is, black men do not get the opportunity to create an identity for themselves; rather, their identity has been handed down to them from the white man and shaped by images and ideas of him that predate his self as a result of that appearance. He is given no chance, from the moment of creation, in his identity; he is “overdetermined from without” (Fanon). Fanon goes on to name the identities ascribed to him, and how he is “responsible at the same time for [his] body...race...ancestors...battered down by tom-toms, cannibalism, intellectual deficiency, fetishism, racial defects, [and] slave ships.”

Fanon’s identity and self-focused theory piece relates exceptionally well to Weems’s work in that the black subjects were never really given an opportunity to establish their own identity – this was constructed by white people, shaped by their experiences and prejudices, and this inescapable identity is seen with the sandblasted text over their photos. Fanon’s theories show the significance of Weems’s appropriation of the daguerreotypes – she is attempting to show that these people have been endlessly categorized and victimized and humiliated at the hands (and for the benefit of) white people. Weems’s piece attempts to reclaim the identities and narratives imposed on her subjects while at the same time forcing viewers to confront the bloody reality of the black American experience.

Works Cited

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Full Text of "From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried":

"From here I saw what happened / you become a scientific profile / a negroid type / an anthropological debate / & a photographic subject / you became mammie, mama, mother & then, yes, confidant – ha / descending the throne you became foot soldier & cook / you became uncle Tom John & Clemens' Jim / Drivers / Riders & Men of Letters / You became a whisper a symbol of a mighty voyage & by the sweat of your brow you laboured for self, family & others / for your names you took hope & humble / black and tanned your whipped wind of change howled low blowing itself – ha – smack into the middle of Ellington's orchestra Billie heard it too & cried strange fruit tears / born with a veil you became root worker, Juju mama, voodoo queen, hoodoo doctor / some said you were the spitting image of evil / you became playmate to the patriarch / and their daughter / you became an accomplice / out of deep rivers, mixed-matched mulattos, variety of types mind you – ha – sprang up everywhere / your resistance was found in the food you placed on the master's table – ha / you became the joker's joke & / anything but what you were ha / some laughed long & hard & loud / others said "Only thing a niggah could do was shine my shoes" / you became boots, spades, & coons / restless after the longest winter you marched & marched & marched / in your sing song prayer you asked didn't my lord deliver Daniel? / and I cried." (<http://carriemaeweems.net/galleries/from-here.html>)