Diasporic Landscapes of Longing

We take home and language for granted; they become nature and their underlying assumptions recede into dogma and orthodoxy.

The exile knows that in a secular and contingent world, homes are always provisional. Borders and barriers, which enclose us within the safety of familiar territory, can also become prisons, and are often defended beyond reason or necessity. Exiles cross borders, break barriers of thought and experience.

—Edward Said, Reflections on Exile

When I was a little girl in the rural South, we would sometimes go to country churches. Traveling down narrow, dusty, unpaved roads, past fields and fields of crops and chewing tobacco, we would ride into a wilderness of nature, arrive late, and yet be welcomed into a hot, crowded sanctuary full of holiness and grace. To awaken a spirit of ecstatic reverie, the choir would sing this song with a line that just made folks shout and cry out with joy, “I wouldn’t take nothing for my journey now.” This line affirmed a vision of life in which all experience, good and bad, everything that happened, could retrospectively be seen as a manifestation of divine destiny. It called on believers to lay claim to an inclusive spirit of unconditional acceptance that would enable all of us to see every path we had taken in life, whether chosen or not, as a necessary one—preparing us for that return to a home we could only dream about. The multilayered vision of life’s journey celebrated in this old-time black church song, where every bit of history and experience is seen as essential to the unfolding of one’s destiny, is rearticulated in the artistic practices of Carrie Mae Weems.
Traditionally trained in mainstream art schools where there was little or no awareness of the way in which the politics of white supremacy shaped and informed academic pedagogies of photographic practice, Weems made a conscious decision to work with black subjects. This choice preceded contemporary academic focus on decentering Western civilization, which necessarily requires that attention shift from a central concern with white subjects. Ironically, for most part, cultural criticism that calls for acts of intervention that would decenter the West tend to reprivilege whiteness by investing in a politics of representation that merely substitutes the central image of colonizing oppressive whiteness with that of a newly reclaimed radical whiteness portrayed as liberatory. Whiteness then remains the starting point for all progressive cultural journeying—that movement across borders which invites the world to take note, to pay attention, to give critical affirmation. The much talked-about discourse of postcoloniality is a critical location that, ironically, often maintains white cultural hegemony. The less well-recognized discursive practices of anticolonialism, on the other hand, decenter, interrogate, and displace whiteness. This discourse disrupts accepted epistemologies to make room for an inclusive understanding of radical subjectivity that allows recognition and appreciation of the myriad ways individuals from oppressed or marginalized groups create oppositional cultural strategies that can be meaningfully deployed by everyone. This constructive cultural appropriation happens only as shifts in standpoint take place, when there is ongoing transformation of ways of seeing that sustain oppositional spheres of representation.

The work of Carrie Mae Weems visually engages a politics of anticolonialism. Concretely decentering the white subject, she challenges viewers to shift their paradigms. Although her work encourages us not to see the black subject through the totalizing lens of race, it is often discussed as though the sign of racial difference is the only relevant visual experience her images evoke. This way of seeing actively reappropriates the work and reinscribes it within the dominant cultural hegemony of Western imperialism and colonialism. By choosing to concentrate attention on black subjects, Weems risks this oversimplification of her artistic practice. In her work, however, she consistently invites us to engage the black subject in ways that call attention to the specificity of race even as we engage an emotional landscape that challenges us to look beyond race and recognize the multiple concerns represented. Unfortunately, the failure to move beyond a conventional practice of art criticism that consistently confines black artists within a discourse that is always and only about racial otherness characterizes much critical writing about Weems's work. Transforming ways of seeing means that we learn to see race—thereby no longer acting in complicity with a white-supremacist aesthetic that would have us believe issues of color and race have no place in artistic practices—without privileging it as the only relevant category of analysis. Carrie Mae Weems's photoworks create a cartography of experience wherein race, gender, and class identity converge, fuse, and mix so as to disrupt and deconstruct simple notions of subjectivity.

While Weems's decision to concentrate on black subjects was a challenge to white cultural hegemony, it signaled, more importantly, the emergence of a lifelong commitment to recover and bring to the foreground submerged knowledge relating to African-American experience. Although Weems was initially captivated by mainstream documentary photography, learning from the work of photographers from Henri Cartier-Bresson to Roy DeCarava, she critically engages a process of image making that fuses diverse traditions and engages mixed media. Early in her artistic development, she was particularly inspired by DeCarava's visual representations of black subjects that invert the dominant culture's aesthetics, in which, informed by racist thinking, blackness was iconographically seen as a marker of ugliness. DeCarava endeavored to reframe the black image within a subversive politics of representation that challenged the logic of racist colonization and dehumanization. Moving among and within the public and private worlds of poor and working-class black experience, which mainstream white culture perceived only as a location of deprivation and spiritual and emotional "ugliness," DeCarava created images of black folks embodying a spirit of abundance and plenty; he claimed blackness as the aesthetic space of ethereal beauty, of persistent, unsuppressed elegance and grace.

Such work fits most neatly into the category that the critic Saidiya Hartman identified as artistic practice aimed at "rescuing and recovering the black subject" via a "critical labor of the positive. It is a resolutely counterhegemonic labor that has as its aim the establishment of other standards of aesthetic value and visual possibility. The intention of the work is corrective representation." Weems extended DeCarava's legacy beyond the investment in creating positive images. Her images problematizing black
subjectivity expand the visual discursive field. Weems’s journey, beginning with this “critical labor of the positive,” is fundamentally altered and refigured as her relation to the black image is transformed by a politics of dislocation. In her early work, Weems’s perception of black subjectivity departed from a concern with the positive and refigured itself within a field of contestation, wherein identity is always fluid, always changing.

Weems is engaged in a process of border crossing, of living within a social context of cultural hybridity. Her understanding of black subjectivity is informed by what Paul Gilroy identified as “the powerful effects of even temporary experiences of exile, relocation, and displacement.” Indeed, it is the effort to recover subjugated knowledge within the realm of visual representation that brings Weems face to face with the limitations of essentialist constructions of black identity.

Contrary to critical discussion that sees Weems as laying claim to an “authentic” black experience, her explorative journeys of recovery and return merely expose how reality is distorted when a unitary representation of black subjectivity is reinscribed rather than consistently challenged. When Weems made the decision to focus on black subjects—as she put it, to “dig in my own backyard”—she was motivated by a longing to restore knowledge, not by a desire to uphold an essentialist politics of representation. (A distinction must be made here between the critical project that seeks to promote a notion of authentic blackness and efforts to reclaim the past that are a gesture of critical resistance and remembrance.) While Weems drew on her family history in the series Family Pictures and Stories, her narrative deflects any one-dimensional construction of these works as “positive” images deployed to challenge racist stereotypes. She not only named her location as that of the outsider who has journeyed away from family and community of origin to return with new perspectives, she juxtaposed and contrasted her memories of people with the present reality. Balancing image making that commemorates the past with the act of highlighting the ways in which the meaning of this past is changed by interrogations in the present, Weems celebrated what Roger Simon called “processes of collective remembrance.” He explained: “Central to these processes is a procedure within which images and stories of a shared past are woven together with a person (or group’s) feelings and comprehension of their embodied presence in time and space. These processes of remembrance are organized and produced within practices of commemoration which initiate and structure the relation between a representation of past events and that constellation of affect and information which define a standpoint from which various people engage such representations.”

Conmemoration is central to Weems’s artistic practice. From early work that focused on constructing images and narratives of families, she moved into an exploration of the journey from Africa to the so-called
New World. There she looked at African-American ideas of home, community, and nation, particularly as expressed in vernacular, working-class culture. Visually revisiting slavery, the Middle Passage, Reconstruction, the civil rights era, and on to militant black power activism, Weems has created images that chart the passion of rebellion and resistance. Commemorative places remind us of the nature of that journey. Simon called this process "insurgent commemoration" that "attempts to construct and engage representations that rub taken-for-granted history against the grain so as to revitalize and rethink what one sees as undesirable and necessary for an open, just and life-sustaining future." In the series Ain't Jokin', Weems used wit and satire to exercise the power of racist representation. Referencing racist iconography, as well as highlighting folklore used to perpetuate white supremacy in everyday life, that makes this iconography appear matter of fact, while contrasting these images with narrative statements that problematize, Weems deconstructed these ways of knowing. Throughout her work, she has relied on strategies of deconstruction to challenge conventional perceptions created by our attachment to fixed ways of looking that lead to blind spots.

In the installation and 22 Million Very Tired and Very Angry People, Weems created an assemblage of carefully chosen political narratives—the declarative confessions of working-class activists, the lyrical prose of the novelist—and placed them with specific images. No fixed, authentic black subject is represented in this piece. The common bond is not race or shared history but, rather, an emotional universe inhabited by individuals committed to ending domination, oppression, and injustice around the world; who are linked together across the boundaries of space, time, race, culture, nationality, and even life and death, by a shared commitment to struggle. As this installation makes clear, rage against injustice, as well as the weariness that comes with protracted struggle, is not the exclusive property of black people. As the image of the globe suggests, it is present wherever oppression and exploitation prevail in daily life.

In this installation, Weems laid claim to a diasporic vision of journeying in search of freedom and strategies of resistance and fulfillment. She has staked her claim by inhabiting the space of blackness in the United States, but also by refusing to stay in her place and rejecting a narrow identity politics imposed by systems of domination. The radical black subjectivity mirrored in this installation audaciously unites that particular

larly with a universal transcendent emotional landscape wherein the desire to be free is the tie that binds and creates continuity in the midst of discontinuity. Within the emotional landscape of this work, the Sea Islands series, and the images of Gone Island, Weems established a commonality of longing, of yearning for connection, for home. Here home is not a place but a condition — felt only when there is freedom of movement and expression. It is the seeking that is shared, not what is found.

The will to search out spaces of recovery and renewal led Carrie Mae Weems to Africa. Articulating with satiric wit and contemplative significance of that search in What Looking for Africa, she problematized this dream of exile and return, of homecoming. She found in the Sea Islands African cultural retentions that link blackness in the diaspora that create an imaginative world wherein Africa can be represented as present yet far away, as both real and mythic. To distinguish this search for subjugated knowledge from nostalgic longing for the mythical, paradise-like homeland that is so often the imperialist vision imposed by contemporary Afrocentric black nationalism, Weems presented images of specific locations. She arranged these sites to compose a ritual of seduction that evokes an emotional connection between Africans and African-Americans, even if that common bond cannot always be documented with visual proof of African cultural retentions in the United States. Her work offers documentary "proof" even as it tells us that this is ultimately not as important as the abiding sense of emotional and spiritual connection that imperialism and colonialism have not been able to suppress.

Within a political context of anticolonialism, Weems positions her work on Africa as a counterhegemonic response to the Western cultural imperialism that systematically erases that connection—that diasporic bond—which links all black people. To do this she decenters the West by abandoning notions that reason is the only way to apprehend the universe. This serves to promote alternative means by which we can know what connects us to distant places, to folks we have never seen but somehow recognize in our hearts as kin. Jane Flax challenged progressive thinkers to resist investing "in the primacy of reason," to prevent it from occupying "a privileged place within our subjectivity or political hopes." With her images of African sites, Weems has insisted on rituals of commemoration that can be understood only within the context of an oppositional worldview, wherein intuition, magic, dream lore are all
tial, authentic black roots, even though it will likely be critically discussed and arranged by curators in a manner that makes this appropriative reinscription possible. Weems is most concerned with ways such knowledge remakes and transforms contemporary radical black subjectivity. A spirit of contestation that emerges with the *West Looking for Africa* series exposes the way Western imperialism informs the relationship of African-Americans to Africa. Yet the failure to embrace a progressive, anticolonial standpoint as the perspective that might enable everyone in the West, including black folks, to see Africa differently in no way delegitimizes the longing to return to Africa as origin site, as location of possible spiritual renewal. The Africa Weems visually represented in the *Gorée Island* series is both a site for insurgent commemorative remembrance and a contemporary location that must be engaged on its own terms, in the present.

Weems has centralized architectural images, linking traditional dwellings with modern space. In these images, Africa is both familiar homeland and location of Otherness. Fundamentally, it is a place that awakens the senses, enabling us to move into a future empowered by the previously subjugated knowledge that we cannot allow reason to over determine constructions of identity and community. As Bernard Tschumi declared, we have an experience of space that is registered in the senses, in a world beyond words: "Space is real for it seems to affect my senses long before my reason. The materiality of my body both coincides with and struggles with the materiality of space. My body carries in itself spatial properties, and spatial determinations... Unfolding against the projections of reason, against the Absolute Truth, against the Pyramids, here is the Sensory Space, the Labyrinth, the Hole... here is where my body tries to rediscover its lost unity, its energies and impulses, its rhythms and its flux." Weems seeks such reunion in her imaginative engagement and remembrance of Africa—past and present. Her visual quest to recover subjugated knowledge is fulfilled in a process of journeying that, as Mary Catherine Bateson proclaimed, makes learning a process by which we come home: "the process of learning turns a strange context into a familiar one, and finally into a habitation of mind and heart. Learning to know a community or a landscape is a homecoming. Creating a vision of that community or landscape is homemaking.” In her art practice, Weems imagines a diasporic landscape of longing, a cartography of desire wherein boundaries are marked only to be transgressed, where the exile returns home only to leave again.