

THE QUIET LANDSCAPES OF CARRIE MAE WEEMS'S *THE LOUISIANA PROJECT*

by Kaila T. Schedeen

What are the stories one tells in dark times? How can a narrative of defeat enable a place for the living or envision an alternative future?

Saidiya Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts"

A woman walks alone into a largely empty room across a sequence of three photographs (Fig. 1). Barefoot, she wears a simple long-sleeved dress of white patterned cloth, hair in a low bun. She moves within the images, framed by a doorway as she spins with her arms raised, her dress lifted in a dynamic twirl, and her back turned to us in a silent moment of contemplation. One can imagine the whooshing of air caught in her dress breaking the lull of the otherwise stilled setting. In the middle image, the same woman gazes at the viewer as she walks toward the doorway. In the final photograph, her face is hidden again as she twists away from the camera in a baffling disavowal of our presence just beyond the lens. The unsettling sequence leaves one to wonder if this gazing is mutual, or whether they are intruding upon a private scene.

The woman's nineteenth-century period-style clothing and the well-kempt Greek Revival era furnishings and architecture conflict with the electric-powered chandelier to confuse any clear sense of time within the black and white triptych. *A Single's Waltz in Time* is one of many works by American artist Carrie Mae Weems (b. 1953) that prompt this sort of temporal entanglement within a larger multi-media series known as *The Louisi-*



Fig. 1 Carrie Mae Weems, *A Single's Waltz in Time*, 2003, gelatin silver print triptych, 20 x 20 in. (51 x 51 cm) each. (© Carrie Mae Weems. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.)

ana Project, which debuted at The Newcomb Art Gallery at Tulane University in 2003.¹ The Newcomb exhibition consisted of three main groupings of works: photographs and video related to the history of New Orleans and its Mardi Gras traditions, expansive ink on canvas prints of video stills lining the walls, and smaller gelatin silver print photographs of Weems moving in and out of Louisiana plantations and urban spaces. This article will focus mainly on this last group of images and the trail Weems's performative figure weaves through Louisiana's physical, temporal, and racial landscapes.

These staged black and white photographs show Weems moving through New Orleans and its peripheries as a spectral witness who haunts sites of enslavement and suffering with her back turned to the camera in an act of visual refusal. This refusal reorients the gaze towards place as subject through a politics of privacy that engages the unseen as an inherent part of slavery's narrative. Weems described her performance in the project's catalog by stating,

I was not amongst that gentle crowd of ragged negroes gathered together in the evening to stand under the old oak tree and sing sad spirituals, while the gentleman of the house and his guests reflected with glee, the naturalness of their privilege. No, I was the chambermaid, the whore, and the witness.²

While partially inhabiting these various performative roles across *The Louisiana Project*, Weems's unwillingness to meet the viewer's gaze throughout suggests an intentional refusal to be accessed and assessed. She looks away from us while we cannot see her. In this way, Weems's becomes the perspective through which viewers must consider the traumatic territory of enslaved women's

experiences that she calls forth in her wanderings. Her ghostly appearances and suggestive embodiment of figures such as “the chambermaid, the whore, and the witness” can be read through the lens of literary scholar Saidiya Hartman’s model of critical fabulation, a form of speculative storytelling used to counter historic and archival voids.³ Weems’s hauntings recall the lives of those who have been erased in self-aggrandizing narratives of U.S. national history, and raise the following questions: how can contemporary artists use visual means to counter neglected histories and create new historical narratives that foreground the lost, the forgotten, and the silenced? What might it mean to critically engage with a history of trauma to imagine a future for those who did not survive? What does it look like to walk into the past while simultaneously turning toward the future?

In this article, I focus on how *The Louisiana Project* collapses space and time in New Orleans to critically engage the history of enslavement alongside its continued legacy of racial inequality. Weems generates this collapse by weaving together recognizably antebellum and postbellum elements of Louisiana’s architecture, thereby creating a temporal entanglement as her figure leads the viewer throughout the series. I argue that *The Louisiana Project* represents a performative journey on Weems’s part through the past, present, and future of New Orleans that ultimately rejects the viewers’ gaze and instead builds on discourses of interiority, self-determination, and critical imagining.

The Wandering Muse

Weems’s time-traveling method is strongest in images such as *Looking Forward* and *Looking Back*, which speak to the codependent nature of past and future in *The Louisiana Project*’s visual realm (Figs. 2 & 3). In the photographic diptych, Weems simultaneously walks towards and away from the viewer in otherwise identical scenes. She wanders “forward” and looks “back” as the viewer remains still. Weems’s mode of looking in these photographs is what scholar Gwendolyn DuBois Shaw has identified as a “wandering gaze”. She guides viewers in confronting the plantation as a site of persistent trauma and identity formation that must be continually grappled with today. As Shaw notes, “We are view-pointed by her, to her, and through her, and we see the land beyond the building. She is the intercessor through whom we come to know

Fig. 2 Carrie Mae Weems, *Looking Forward*, 2003, gelatin silver print, 20 x 20 in. (51 x 51 cm). (© Carrie Mae Weems. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.)



Fig. 3 Carrie Mae Weems, *Looking Back*, 2003, gelatin silver print, 20 x 20 inches (51 x 51 cm). (© Carrie Mae Weems. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.)



the landscape of the past in a new and different way.”⁴ Key to Shaw’s interpretation of Weems as an intercessor is the fact that Weems displaces herself in favor of a performative figure that she embodies, referred to as the muse.⁵ As Weems stated of her work in a 2009 interview with fellow photographer and longtime friend Dawoud Bey (b.

1953), "...I use myself simply as a vehicle for approaching the question of power, and following where that leads me to and through. It's never about me; it's always about something larger," later adding, "I am both subject and object; performer and director."⁶

The muse in *The Louisiana Project* is better understood as a spectral guide whose presence is pointedly personal and political. Weems's apparition in *The Louisiana Project* is poignant specifically because she is a Black woman. Her race and gender inform the ways in which the muse is understood within the racially charged plantation landscape. She cannot be a neutral figure in spaces where Blackness is marked as aberrant while whiteness marks itself as neutral, powerful, and invisible.⁷ The plantation, as art historian Angela D. Mack and others argued in the exhibition catalog for *Landscape of Slavery: The Plantation in American Art*, is an irrefutable sign of the horrors of enslavement.⁸ Whiteness is both invisible and ever-present in the plantation's shadow. Weems's muse then is immediately marked as oppositional in such spaces on the basis of her skin color, which is compounded by her gender and the particular forms of violence Black women experienced in enslavement. Saidiya Hartman's writing echoes the inherited burden that narratives of trauma still carry within Black bodies:

The history of the black body in the Americas is a chronicle of terror: enslavement, domination, subjection, and confinement. Memories of suffering are excised in the flesh. The body acts as witness to the cruel repressions of history. The undocumented, discounted, and forgotten events we no longer choose to remember leave their traces on the body.⁹

Weems's figure is coded with the terror linked to enslavement on plantations, even as she attempts to dispossess herself of it. However, her performances are not re-inscriptions of trauma. Weems preserves herself from the potential violence of outside gazes through the distancing measure of playing the muse and that role's gestural turning away from the camera. In many of the photographs, the artist's figure explores and dances in a state of inaccessible internal contemplation that cannot be defined. She also inhabits distinct postures, such as the back-turned figure, that art history has traditionally associated with interiority, exploration, and self-determination in European genres emerging from early 19th century Romanticism. Weems "riffs" on this and other well-worn poses of the Western

art historical canon, carrying-out a form of appropriation that art historian Adrienne L. Childs describes as "Adopting the techniques, images, tropes, or narratives of canonical European art...a strategy that offers sites of resistance and/or passageways toward reckoning with personal concerns about the vagaries of identity, misadventures of art history, and the complexities of belonging."¹⁰ Poses that are often presented as neutral, race-less, and universal then become newly charged when performed by Weems within spaces of historically endless manipulation of the Black female body. Where Black people have been pictured in plantation spaces as property, labor, and/or caricatures of imagined racial indolence, Weems enters as a counter-specter. She both recognizes and condemns these expectations by turning away from them.

Turning Away

While the muse often appears upright in suggested motion, in *Pondering Your Remains* she instead embraces stillness (Fig. 4). Here she is shown gazing out a window from a chair inside Nottoway Plantation, completed in 1859, and considered the largest surviving antebellum plantation home in Louisiana. The property now operates as a resort and popular wedding destination. The figure's thoughts are suggested through the words printed above

Fig. 4 Carrie Mae Weems, *Pondering Your Remains*, 2003, ink on canvas, 84 x 84 in. (213.4 x 213.4 cm). (© Carrie Mae Weems. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.)



that read, "While sitting upon the ruins of your remains, I pondered the course of history." The subject and object of this sentence remain somewhat ambiguous if the reader accepts Weems's earlier statement about her body as a stand-in, and "your remains" could refer to any number of historic figures: the plantation's original owner John Hampden Randolph (1813-1883), any of the 155 people he enslaved on this property, or the house itself.¹¹ The word "ruins" also contradicts the actual condition of this grand space, which has been maintained in its nineteenth-century state to an almost unnatural degree. Lace curtains line the tall windows, ornate mirrors hang on the walls next to candelabras, and a grand piano sits in the middle of the open space. Similar images to this one lined the walls of the Newcomb Gallery exhibition showing Weems peering through windows and doorways in contemplation or search of something. As she moves outside and beyond Nottoway to other similar plantations in the region, the viewer follows her back-turned figure along pathways and across lawns overlooking the luxurious ruins of the slave trade, all the while seeing past Weems to the landscape beyond.

Fig. 5 Caspar David Friedrich, *Wanderer Above a Sea of Fog*, ca. 1817, oil on canvas, 37 21/64 x 29 29/64 in. (94.8 x 74.8 cm). (bpk Bildagentur/ Hamburger Kunsthalle, Hamburg/ Photo: Elke Walford./ Art Resource, NY. Inv.: 5161. On permanent loan from the Foundation for the Promotion of the Hamburg Art Collections.)



Among other art historical references present in *The Louisiana Project*, the muse's similarities to the back-turned stance in the Romantic tradition is striking. The most oft cited is perhaps Caspar David Friedrich's (1774-1840) painting *Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog* (1818) (Fig. 5). This vertical painting features a back-turned male figure at the center of a landscape composition featuring thick cloud cover, rocky cliffs, and scattered trees. The man holds a walking cane in his right hand while propping up his left foot on an uneven, rocky ledge. The scene is painted in a calming palette of blues, creams, and grays. As the wanderer is turned away from the viewer, all that is left to consider are his suit-clad back, wind-swept hair, and the landscape beyond him. This specific stance of the man in Friedrich's painting became known in German Romanticism as the *Rückenfigur*, translated to figure from the back, or back figure.¹² The *Rückenfigur* promotes the ideals of interiority, freedom, and wanderlust that accompanied the increasingly globalized world of wealthy, powerful men in the 19th century. He, as this figure is almost exclusively male, emerged during the early period of German Romanticism as a pose that communicated an invitation into the scene through human habitation.¹³ I contend that Weems's muse performs a similar role in *The Louisiana Project*. She is the project's wanderer, the human figure through which viewers contemplate the surrounding scene.

It is important to note, in relation to Friedrich's works, the distinct sense of white male authority over the privacy afforded by a back-turned pose. While women can be identified in similar stances throughout this period, it is more often indoors as a nude, lounging odalisque; an object to be admired rather than a prompt for metaphorical exploration. For example, Surrealist photographer Man Ray's (1890-1976) *Le Violon d'Ingres* (1924) depicts his nude female subject as an object, a violin to be precise, superimposing curved black shapes on her mid-back to suggest the cutouts of the stringed instrument.¹⁴ Man Ray's photograph calls back to Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres's (1780-1867) famous painting *La Grande Odalisque* (1814), in which a nude woman's serpentine body lazes sensually on a couch as she gazes back towards the viewer in invitation. The painting emerged from a subset of Romanticism known as Orientalism, which featured fantasized depictions of people, places, and animals from a generalized East which loosely encompassed parts of Northern Africa and Western Asia and was represented as the uncivilized counterpart to Europe.¹⁵ Counter to the self-determination, confidence, and privacy indicated by Friedrich's male *Rückenfigur*, female counterparts in Orientalism were often sexualized

and marked as available objects of male sexual desire. This pose and its legacy have therefore become a generative space for counter visions of access that question rather than capitulate to dominating gazes. Weems's citation of the wandering *Rückenfigur* effectively incorporates the tradition of the back-turned figure while remaining critical of its exclusivity.

The artist Lorna Simpson (b. 1960) has famously appropriated this stance with a critical eye towards the ways it has objectified specific groups. She has been celebrated by scholars like Huey Copleand for her back-turned portraits, often paired with text that assertively recognizes the Black female body as a site of violent dispossession. In the six-panel photographic work *Guarded Conditions* (1989) for example, a female figure turns away from the camera and crosses her arms behind her, in effect shielding herself from our already abridged view (Fig. 6). She wears her braided hair short above a simple white sleeveless shift and black flats. Below the tripartite frames are twenty-one blocks of text that alternate between the phrases "SEX ATTACKS" and "SKIN ATTACKS". These repetitions further one's un-

Fig. 6 Lorna Simpson, *Guarded Conditions*, 1989, 18 dye diffusion color Polaroid prints, 21 engraved plastic plaques, 17 plastic letters, Overall: 84 1/4 x 148 1/4 x 1 5/8 in. (214 x 376.6 x 4.1 cm). (© Lorna Simpson. Courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth, Photo: Phillipp Scholz Rittermann.)



derstanding of the figures' "guarded conditions" being her race and her gender. Refusing to meet the camera's gaze, she guards herself from its lens.

Gestures of Refusal

A correspondingly antagonistic engagement with the gaze appears in *The Louisiana Project*. Similar to Simpson, Weems performs what writer and cultural critic bell hooks (1952-2021) has termed the "oppositional gaze", which she described in its 1992 conception as a form of resistance and transformation for people of the Black Diaspora. hooks contended in her essay on the subject,

...all attempts to repress our/black peoples' right to gaze had produced in us an overwhelming longing to look, a rebellious desire, an oppositional gaze. By courageously looking, we defiantly declared: "Not only will I stare. I want my look to change reality."¹⁶

The gaze for both Weems and Simpson is key to their ability to imagine new narratives and prompt change; it is their mode of critical fabulation. Additionally, both artists use the back-turned figure as a way to point to dark realities that go widely unseen, unspoken, or unacknowledged. Yet where *Guarded Conditions* is a forceful red light in the face of blatant intersectional inequalities, *The Louisiana Project* presents a more beguiling form of confrontation. Weems's figure enters this subversive tradition of the oppositional gaze wearing a similarly loose-fitting garment and turns away from the viewer, giving only rare glimpses of her identity and thoughts. In *A Distant View*, she is sprawled on the grass under shady oak trees as she looks towards the early 19th century Greek Revival-style country house known as Malus Beauregard (Fig. 7).

Though the image appears quiet and serene, reading the exhibition catalogue for *The Louisiana Project* reveals Weems's polemical engagement with this landscape. The photograph appears inside the catalogue opposite a quote from German writer Baron Ludwig von Reizenstein that reads, "New Orleans is the spring from which so many thousands have drawn their wealth, but it is also a bitter cup of suffering, misery, and despair. New Orleans is now the prima donna of the South, the whore insatiable in her embraces."¹⁷ The lines come from the gothic novel *The Mysteries of New Orleans*, first published as a serial in a

Fig. 7 Carrie Mae Weems, *A Distant View*, 2003, gelatin silver print, 20 x 20 in. (51 x 51 cm). (© Carrie Mae Weems. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.)



New Orleans newspaper between 1854 and 1855. In the text, Reizenstein describes an apocalyptic revolution led by the fictional Hiram the Freemason, the son of a mixed-race prostitute and a German aristocrat, in retribution for the sin of slavery.¹⁸ The text describes the horrors of New Orleans as such:

How many hearts have beat their last here?
 How many tears have been poured out here?
 How many have looked about hopeless and
 despairing, feeling themselves alone and abandoned
 amid the chaotic hustle and bustle? New
 Orleans is the tree with the forbidden fruit; here
 the old snake extends its three-forked tongue as
 far as the Gulf shore and licks its frothy waves.
 Here life and death dance continuously with
 each other, each sinking into the other's arms.
 Whoever has not yet seen sin, come hither!¹⁹

The muse emerges in Weems's photographs as the parallel protagonist of Reizenstein's novel, posing the above questions just as she asserts herself as "the chambermaid, the whore, and the witness" of Weems's visions. The muse inhabits these roles in an imagined revolution on her oppressors and the city of New Orleans which Weems directs from afar. The audience must act as a witness and decipher this performance. The position that viewers are

Fig. 8 Andrew Wyeth, *Christina's World*, 1948, tempera on panel, 32 1/4 x 47^{3/4} in. (81.9 x 121.3 cm). Purchase. (Digital Image © The Museum of Modern Art / Licensed by SCALA / Art Resource, NY © 2023 Wyeth Foundation for American Art / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.)



left in lacks comfort, surety, and clear intent, representing the larger role that viewers play while bearing witness to Weems's wanderings.

The visual similarity of *A Distant View* to Andrew Wyeth's (1917-2009) painting *Christina's World* (1948) (Fig. 8) is striking, particularly in its configuration of a back-turned foreground figure and background architecture. Wyeth's painting depicts a woman sprawled on a lawn with her back towards the viewer as she gazes towards a distant house. Her upper body appears primed for some sort of action as she leans towards the house on thin arms, her left hand reaching through the grass. The figure is famously based partly off Wyeth's neighbor Anna Christina Olson, who had a degenerative muscle condition that slowly eroded her legs' mobility.²⁰ While much of the analysis of *Christina's World* is focused on this foreground figure and her model's perceived disability, attention should also be paid to the structures in the distance that play counterpart to the scene's narrative. They consist of a dull, white-washed barn, nearby farmhouse, and outhouse, with a barely noticeable line of clothing hanging between. Christina's hidden gaze towards this area suggests that the buildings are the subject of her thoughts, whatever they may be. Much like with Weems in *The Louisiana Project*, Christina's pointed turning towards these buildings encourages viewers to see them through her eyes; put simply, the viewer's gaze is directed through hers to the beyond. The structures are then inflected with the meaning they hold for Christina, which many have presumed, but none can infallibly know. The act of looking itself then becomes an important part of the scene. As art historian Randall C. Griffin writes:

Her act of looking intently toward the house announces itself as central to the picture's

meaning. If this painting is seen as a portrait, it becomes conspicuous, and significant, that her face is not visible. This space of absence creates a screen onto which the audience can project personal narratives, transforming Christina into a stand-in for the viewer.²¹

As Griffin suggests, there is a dialogue created by Wyeth in his painting between Christina, her act of looking, and the subject of her looking, that viewers enter by projecting themselves onto the figure on the basis of our shared anthropomorphism.

Weems's *A Distant View* sets up a similar interlocation between the muse, both the act and the subject of her looking, and the viewers gazing towards her. Viewers become one node of a larger constellation created by Weems in her creative process. While the muse certainly encourages viewers to see through her, she is not simply an object to be looked through. Weems's portrayal in *A Distant View* serves as a bridge between viewer and subject, past and present, slavery and its legacies, but it is a bridge that cannot be fully crossed. By inhabiting the traditional role of the male-occupied back-turned figure, Weems claims her right to privacy and self-determination through an act of refusal historically unavailable to Black women. As the intersectional feminist anthology, *This Bridge Called My Back* fervently expressed in its original 1981 publication, the female body of color has long been reduced to an object defined by the desires of others. The writer, scholar, and activist Audre Lorde's infamous words therein that "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house" hold considerable weight in light of Weems's photographs, where the master's houses remain standing in the post-antebellum south.²² As Weems's figure stands as a ghostly apparition of those who suffered before her, she redefines the visual tools with which viewers might read her. She therefore creates the space and material grounds on which her own re-imaginings of Louisiana can cultivate alongside the viewers, without being subject to them.

Listening to The *Louisiana Project*

In one of the final untitled scenes from this section of the series, the muse gazes slightly upwards towards a

billboard (Fig. 9). She has been transported to a present-day New Orleans with power lines, paved roads, and an air conditioning unit hanging from a window. A billboard shows a group of four Black men drinking and looking towards the camera, flashing gang signs from behind a door that reads "Board of Directors". Underneath the image is a label that says, "Here's to the other 9 to 5". The billboard hangs starkly against a white-washed

Fig. 9 Carrie Mae Weems, *Untitled (Woman standing before commercial billboard)*, 2003, pigment ink print, 20 x 20 in. (51 x 51 cm). (© Carrie Mae Weems. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.)



building that takes up most of the photograph, framing it for deeper contemplation. In an interview with the Newcomb's curator Susan Cahan, Weems contextualized the work by stating:

I long to see images of black people that are more than simply prepackaged stereotypes. It was really rather shocking that in this town, which is fifty-percent black, at least, that there are no images of black people anywhere, with the exception of this billboard that happened to be on the side of a liquor store. That is how much we have been reduced in this country.²³

The billboard is seen through the muse's eyes, allowing viewers to imagine what alternative images of Blackness might look like beginning with the one on view, one not structured by racist stereotypes and violence but by a

generative reappraisal of meaning. By turning away and towards the billboard as the muse, Weems prompts viewers to do this reimagining work themselves.

Ultimately, Weems encourages her audience to reorient themselves to continued instances of inequality by making temporally disparate moments bear upon one another. The viewer becomes entangled in the constellation of spaces and times that Weems calls forth. While *Untitled* is set in present-day New Orleans, its antebellum resonances—brought to the fore in the larger context of *The Louisiana Project* and the muse's wanderings—are meant to unsettle. This friction was acutely described by Shaw in her own interpretation when she stated,

As our wandering gaze is focalized through that of Weems, we see New Orleans as a matrix of communities afloat in the wake of an antebellum history of enslavement, a post-bellum product of segregation, and, in the contemporary moment, a city still marked by post-Katrina displacement, creative resurrection, and creeping gentrification. To view and re-view *The Louisiana Project* is to see the future through visions of the past, and through this oracular gift, to see the ever-reflexive nature of the present in relation to the past.²⁴

In closing, I suggest an additional mode through which it is possible to tune into Weems's photographs. Each image from *The Louisiana Project* is marked by a sense of quietness. This is seen aesthetically in the soft approach to line and shading, physically in Weems's stances, and metaphorically in the intended meaning of her wanderings. The photographs are *still* in their very nature. I borrow aural terminology from visual scholar Tina Campt to suggest an imaginative blending of sensory worlds that allows the artist and her viewers to access the undercurrents of obscured histories. In *Listening to Images* (2017), Campt treats vernacular archival photographs of Black subjects through an attention to quiet in order to "access the affective registers through which these images enunciate alternate accounts of their subjects."²⁵ Campt's notion of listening to photographs broadens the affective texture of images beyond sight to include sound as an additional access point for photographic engagement.

Quiet is a provocative frame for understanding the complex multi-sensory web Weems weaves around her works, which viewers can access through the act of listening. In this way, listening is another mode of tem-

poral entanglement between the past Weems calls forth and the present of the viewer. Camp's theory outlines an entirely different relationship to time that involves an active reimagining of potential futures for people stuck in stasis. She offers a way forward through a new grammar of Black futurity, referencing literary theorist Hortense Spillers and saying, "The grammar of black feminist futurity is a performance of a future that hasn't yet happened but must."²⁶ In light of *The Louisiana Project*, this means a recalibration of prevailing historical narratives. The past is no longer simply the past, but the present and the future. This interconnected sense of time allows space for an imagined future that moves beyond past and present oppressive social structures.

Like Hartman's critical fabulation, Camp's notion of listening allows one to go further than what archival absences around enslaved experiences allow, daring instead to provide a mode for critically imagining moments free of violence and defined by joy. This is where the muse is central to *The Louisiana Project*. The audience tune into her as a storyteller, guide, and specter. Her performative appearances are the metronome that Weems uses to access alternate historical currents and synchronize the viewers' collective gaze. The photographs discussed here are each potential nodes of critical fabulation wherein Weems's acts of listening are meant to prompt the viewer's own curiosity. Turning away from the camera is critical to this process. In doing so, Weems confronts the past while forcing space for alternative spaces of imagining. She asks viewers to contend with the continued apparitions of enslavement, settler colonialism, and racial violence by identifying and gazing directly into their physical manifestations. Weems argues in photographs like *Untitled* that Louisiana is a place fractured between the antebellum past and the postbellum future, where not much has changed besides the means of one's anguish. However, violence is the genesis of Weems's work, not the denouement. At the marrow of *The Louisiana Project* is the potential for better things yet to come. When viewed as a whole, it is a compelling reminder that how we remember history defines the shape of the future.

Notes

1. During the bicentennial year of the Louisiana Purchase in 2003, the Newcomb joined several other leading cultural institutions in New Orleans to reflect on their city's transformation over the two-hundred years since the Purchase's signing, which transferred New Orleans and over 827,000 square miles of land from French to American hands, effectively doubling U.S. territory.
2. Carrie Mae Weems, Susan Cahan, and Pamela R. Metzger, *Carrie Mae Weems: The Louisiana Project* (New Orleans: Newcomb Art Gallery, Tulane University, 2004), 32.
3. Saidiya Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," *Small axe* no. 26 (June 2008): 11.
4. Gwendolyn DuBois Shaw, "The Wandering Gaze of Carrie Mae Weems's The Louisiana Project," *Panorama: Journal of the Association of Historians of American Art* 4, no. 1 (Spring 2018), <https://doi.org/10.24926/24716839.1629>.
5. Dawoud Bey, "Carrie Mae Weems by Dawoud Bey," *BOMB Magazine* no. 108 (Summer 2009), 66.
6. Ibid 63, 66.
7. I am referring here to scholar Richard Dyer's description of the ways that whiteness has assumed a normative and dominant role in racial discourse: "The invisibility of whiteness as a racial position in white (which is to say dominant) discourse is of a piece with its ubiquity...Whites are everywhere in representation. Yet precisely because of this and their placing as norm they seem not to be represented to themselves as whites but as people who are variously gendered, classed, sexualized and abled. At the level of racial representation, in other words, whites are not of a certain race, they're just the human race." Richard Dyer, *White* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), 3.
8. Angela D. Mack et. al., eds., *Landscape of Slavery: The Plantation in American Art* (Columbia, S.C: University of South Carolina Press, 2008).
9. Saidiya V. Hartman, "Excisions of the Flesh," in *Lorna Simpson: For the Sake of the Viewer* (Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago; New York: Universe Publishing, 1992), 55.
10. Adrienne L. Childs, introduction to "Riff: African American Artists and the European Canon," *Panorama: Journal of the Association of Historians of American Art* 4, no. 1 (Spring 2018), <https://doi.org/10.24926/24716839.1627>.
11. Karen Kingsley, "Nottoway Plantation," 64 Parishes, last modified November 18, 2016, <https://64parishes.org/entry/nottoway-plantation-2>.
12. Though Caspar David Friedrich was not the first artist to utilize the back-turned figure in his works, his paintings have become iconic examples of the increasingly popular Rückenfigur in 19th century art. For more, see: Geoffrey D. Schott, "The Rückenfigur: A Note on an Intriguing Rear-View Pictorial Device," *Perception* 49, no. 5 (May 2020): 600–605. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0301006620912361>.
13. While Friedrich did paint some instances of a female Rückenfigur, such as *Woman at a Window* (1822) and *Moonrise over the Sea* (1822), these figures do not hold the same level of independence as their male counterparts. The female Rückenfigur is most often encased within a domestic setting and lacks the wandering aspect that is central to *Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog*.
14. "La violon d'Ingres" is also a French idiom that translates to "hobby", suggesting even further that Man Ray's depiction of this figure was meant to be a (potentially) humorous play on his appreciation for manipulating the female body. "Le Violon d'Ingres (Ingres's Violin)," Getty Museum Collection, accessed August 6, 2022, <https://www.getty.edu/art/collection/object/104E4A#full-artwork-details>.
15. For more detailed descriptions of Romanticism, Orientalism, and their relationship, see: Anita Brooker, *Romanticism and Its Discontents* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux: 2000); Ian Richard

Netton, ed., *Orientalism Revisited: Art, Land and Voyage* (New York: Routledge, 2013); James Parry, *Orientalist Journeys: Western Artists in the Middle East, 1830-1920* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2017); Christine Peltre, *Orientalism in Art*, trans. John Goodman (New York: Abbeville Press, 1998); William Vaughan, *Romanticism and Art* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1994).

16. bell hooks, "The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators," in *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End Press, 1992), 116. I also consider Weems's critical engagement with gender through discourse around the gaze originating from Laura Mulvey's touchstone essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1973). The absence of race in Mulvey's initial writing has been expanded in more recent years by other scholars such as George Yancy in *Black Bodies, White Gaze* (2008), who, similarly to hooks, references Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin White Mask* (1952) as a touchstone for their arguments.

17. Weems et. al., *Carrie Mae Weems: The Louisiana Project*, 32.

18. It is important here to note Weems's repeated reference of German traditions and/or sources in her project. The area surrounding the Mississippi River north of New Orleans maintained a large German influence in antebellum times that remains central to the region's history of enslavement. The 1811 German Coast Revolt/Uprising—one of the largest uprisings of enslaved peoples in the Americas—occurred along this route, then called the German Coast due to its heavy German influences. For more on this event, see: Daniel Rasmussen, *American Uprising: The Untold Story of America's Largest Slave Revolt* (New York: Harper, 2011).

19. Baron Ludwig von Reizenstein, *The Mysteries of New Orleans*, trans. and ed. Steven Rowan (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), 3-4.

20. Randall C. Griffin, "Andrew Wyeth's Christina's World: Normalizing the Abnormal Body," in *American Art*, Vol. 24, No. 2 (Summer 2010), 33.

21. *Ibid.*, 32.

22. Audre Lorde, "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle The Master's House," in *This Bridge Called My*

Back: Writings of Radical Women of Color, ed. Cherríe Moraga et. al (New York: Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, 1981), 99.

23. Susan Cahan, "Carrie Mae Weems: Reflecting Louisiana," in *Carrie Mae Weems: The Louisiana Project* (New Orleans: Newcomb Art Gallery, Tulane University, 2004), 12.

24. Shaw, "The Wandering Gaze of Carrie Mae Weems's The Louisiana Project," n.p.

25. Tina Campt, *Listening to Images* (Durham; London: Duke University Press, 2017), 5.

26. *Ibid.*, 17.