

# WOMEN AND MIGRATION(S) II



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Cover image: FIRELEI BÁEZ for Marie-Louise Coidavid, exiled, keeper of order, Anacaona, 2018. Oil on canvas. Installation view: 10th Berlin Biennale, Akademie der Künste (Hanseatenweg), Berlin, 9 June 9-September 2018. Photo: Timo Ohler. Cover design by Anna Gatti



# 18. Carrie Mae Weems—Making Points and Changing Views

*Deborah Willis*

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The way to right wrongs is to turn the light of truth upon them.

Ida B. Wells

I am a storyteller and therefore an optimist, a firm believer in the ethical bend of the human heart... from my point of view, your life is already artful—waiting, just waiting, for you to make it art.

Toni Morrison

Inspired by the broad history of beauty in art, photography, architecture, and fashion, New York-based conceptual artist Carrie Mae Weems enacts a moment of pleasure and imagines worlds of abundance that encourage interiority of mind and a spirit of contemplation in her work focusing on Mary J. Blige (Queen B). Weems has received critical, global attention for her photographs and her performativity in photography and video that focuses on black life globally. In the fall of 2020, Weems created a work for the Vienna State Opera House Safety Curtain and it reads as an ideal setting for this large-scale portrait as concepts of stage and staging codes of beauty are performed in this photograph that simultaneously explores treasured moments, and literal and symbolic treasure.

Beauty in opera often comes as much from the performances presented on the stage as from the set design, dramatic scenes, attire, and the actors themselves. Beauty is enacted in this photograph with the centering of iconic singer Mary J. Blige, the black American female subject adorned in fur, diamonds, and pearls, as she surveys and affirms

her beauty in an oval-shaped mirror, with a red velvet backing. I imagine that viewers in the opera house were amazed with the monumentality of black beauty on the global stage as they sat in their seats looking at objects of beauty in Weems's photograph, which is printed on the safety curtain.

Weems is well aware of representations or codes of desire, from the arrays of fresh peonies and pink roses to the oval-shaped frames with crown and tiara, which reflect the mirror, to the marble busts by artist Kehinde Wiley that recreate artworks from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in miniature. Metaphors on history, linkages, and connections abound through the use of a Bamana Ci Wara headdress from Mali, which honors prosperity and success of people who cultivated the land for harvest. A seated figure carved in ebony from Nigeria rests on the mantel of the ornate fireplace. Weems signals opulence through the use of crystal, silver, and gold trimmings on pillows, upholstered chairs, and decorated marble walls. Beauty and grace are denoted in this image by the appearance of a 'stuffed' white swan. In framing this interplay between history and metaphor, Weems considers the narrative of the ballet *Swan Lake* as it explores notions of mobility and of elegance, translated in this image through style and lavishness. Weems appreciates the power of architectural and interior spaces and the viewer is invited to enter into a space of power.

Weems is cognizant of what it means to create an environmental portrait that offers the viewer space for dreaming, of new identities and re-envisioned potential, the license to both preserve and remake the world. By placing the large globe on the table Weems explores the idea of controlling/mapping new spaces to reimagine beauty in the Global South. Weems conjures the imaginary of both viewer and Queen B by visualizing pleasure and progress, desire and possibility, through jewelry, a designer sweat suit, and a swept-up hairstyle that accentuates her beauty. The formal table setting with its lavish meal of succulent fruits, cheeses, berries, and loaves of bread placed on colorful tablecloths provides the structure of this staged scene, disrupting a history of denying black beauty.

Weems's image is infused with the nostalgia and romanticism of classical art, a broad history of culture, race, and gender as told through iconic references to global conquest and engagement. Weems challenges

both historic and contemporary visual narratives that privilege others by highlighting race, class and style in the symbolic context of the opera house. In focusing our gaze on this depiction of black wealth and black beauty, Weems establishes a presence and place for black women throughout the world and throughout history. The richness and complexity of this evocative photograph conveys a body politic that intersects with popular culture and aesthetics. In the image, theater, fashion, and art are restaged to invoke new histories and reimagine present-day narratives. In Weems's glamorous and idealized portrait, the black female body occupies a prominent place in art history as she does in music.

Weems continues to receive critical attention for her performance art and art installations focusing on black life in the low country of South Carolina, sea islands off the coast of Georgia and southern Louisiana, New Orleans, as well as cities in the United Kingdom, Germany, Cuba, Senegal, Ghana, and Italy. Weems's 2006 *Roaming* series also consists of large-scale photographs created in cities in Europe as they reference imperial and colonial power. She explores the complexities of representation in contemporary art practices that inform and translate views on gender and race. By creating a visual memoir that looks at freedom and migration, Weems's *Roaming* series is a search for a counter-memory. Weems focuses her lens on her own ability to roam freely and to see the building of empires. She considers and reflects on the past and the lack of free will of women who were forced to migrate and travel to work on foreign soil.

*Roaming* is about seeing and being seen. It is about mobility and freedom. It forces the viewer to see *race*, often obscured or erased in museum exhibitions; *beauty*, denied or accepted when considering the black female body; and the *potential* of the black robed figure that guides us through rugged landscapes, pristine city views, and forbidden class structures. Weems's project begs the question, "What did early travel photographers see during the colonial periods?" Weems challenges us to see what travelers in the past saw, and the *hope* of the traveler of today. Weems is aware of what it means to critically evaluate images from the picturesque to the environmental portrait and how types of images are viewed in art and popular culture. She grasps the absence of black women in art institutions and cultural space as she migrates.

Weems explores *absence* as she travels the world. We see Weems looking at historical sites, landscapes, and monuments. As curator Franklin Sirmans so aptly states, with *Roaming* and the related *Museum Series*, Weems combined her interest in the structures of history (its monuments, museums, and other institutions) with herself in the landscape. Now she is no longer acting but is functioning as an omniscient observer, suggesting either a dominance of the landscape by humans or the puny insignificance of humanity in nature. In both the photographs taken in front of classical structures in Rome and in the *Museum Series*, Weems stands like a monumental sculpture to be reckoned and dealt with in the confines of those structures on which she stares down.<sup>1</sup>

The power of her images is informed with nostalgia and romanticism, both intriguing aspects of the *Roaming* series. She explores the mysteries and challenges of historical narratives that privilege other alternate stories. She is her own muse as she poses questions within the frame of history and as she restages and projects a new visual order through the ground glass. Throughout her explorations in *Roaming*, Weems is both witness and interpreter.

Weems is also known for her photographic series and multi-screen projections relating to family, beauty, and memory. In the past, she has constructed a series of works interrogating black women's presence in popular culture as well as architecture and art history. An artist concerned about iconicity, she problematizes the icon by standing and facing historical sites. Noting and contesting inequities, Weems establishes a presence and place for black women throughout the world and throughout history. In the images of her erect body dressed in a black gown, she leads us through vast landscapes with confidence and ease—we are assured that we will be guided on a difficult but necessary journey.

In the 1990s the spoken word (the sonic) became central to her art making, which revealed a new range for Weems as she could broaden her work by performing abstracted memories. Weems is a passionate

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1 Franklin Sirmans, 'A World of her Own: Carrie Mae Weems and Performance', in *Carrie Mae Weems: Three Decades of Photography and Video*, Nashville: Frist Center for the Visual Arts in association with Yale University Press, 2013, p. 53.

researcher and incorporates diverse narratives to reflect the past and the present.

As she positions herself in the global landscape, Weems reflects on the contemporary narrative of migration, combining and connecting historical references from the Middle Passage to forced and voluntary migration today. By using her own body to recall and locate the social imaginary found in history and in the current news, her images gain in intensity as we see her as an eyewitness to past and contemporary violence. *Roaming* for Weems is about pondering and disrupting injustices. Her journey considers the plight of not only women, but of men and children as well. Current debates on migration oftentimes invoke the violence suffered by women and men who have lost children in the wake of war and displacement. Weems offers us a contemplative moment to consider the inequities experienced by mothers and women who moved, under the threat of intimidation and death, to some of the landscapes that she shares with us in her images. In my view, Weems's compassion is demonstrated as she evokes mourning cloth in her black gown.

Carrie Mae Weems's "When and Where I Enter—Mussolini's Rome" (2006) is a large-scale photograph from her *Roaming* series. Its title is based on the memoir of the nineteenth-century black woman educator, Anna Julia Cooper. Current debates on migration are oftentimes violent and intimidating; many women have lost children in the wake of war and displacement. Weems acts as witness to these events. By embodying these women and re-enacting their journey, Weems becomes a messenger who not only helps the viewer visualize the experiences and heightens our senses, but also provokes us to want to do something. Weems's presence is strong and is the hidden witness that incites action. Weems stands in front and behind a medium and large format camera to produce work that critiques both social history and the history of photography, even as she uses the photograph to visualize and inform. The richness found in these striking photographs and the memories invoked convey a political consciousness of the tragedies at sea and in cities around the world.

*Roaming* builds on Weems's earlier series. I believe it is her intention to require her viewers to rethink and question their understanding of social justice. Using the photograph as an object of memory, Weems

reworks and restages images to construct narratives that explore the experiences of those anonymous women in history who have been subjected to the camera's gaze—specifically the gaze that dehumanizes and obscures. Weems adds to the visual representation of the current politicized environment for black migrating bodies with subversive photographs that explore new ways of expressing memory and opening opportunities to transform and make visible a complex history of beauty in history. Weems offers distinctive points of view on migration that shift our understanding about the ubiquity of global movement in our current cultural, economic and socio-political environments. She contemplates the idea of migration as it intersects with personal narratives, self-invention, issues of cultural identity, race, gender, sexuality, political activism, social justice, leisure culture, the discourse of domination, and global freedom struggles. In a society where stories of migration are often stigmatized and excluded, Weems puts these diverse stories at the forefront of her art practice.



Fig. 1 Carrie Mae Weems, *When and Where I Enter — Mussolini's Rome* (2006), digital c-print, 73x61" (framed). © Carrie Mae Weems. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.





Fig. 2 Carrie Mae Weems, *Queen B* (Mary J. Blige) (2020), *Safety Curtain*, museum in progress, Vienna State Opera (2020/2021), large scale picture. © Carrie Mae Weems. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York. Photo Credit: Andreas Scheiblecker, Copyright: the artist and museum in progress

