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Appositional Black Aesthetics: Theorizing Black Religion in the Visual Art of Carrie Mae Weems

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ABSTRACT

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Scholars of religion have long looked to forms of cultural production as source material from which to proffer claims concerning the nature and meaning of black religion. And yet, while robust attention has been given to mining literary and musical forms for religious significance, few scholars in the field of black religion have rigorously engaged visual and aesthetic methods and theories. This project contributes to efforts to fill this void by examining visual artist Carrie Mae Weems’s conceptual photography as a case study. In particular, I posit that Weems’s images are reflective of what I conceive as an appositional black aesthetic. Drawn from Fred Moten’s notion of appositionality, this aesthetic refers to art and images that depict black life with complexity and a type of multidimensional openness that extends beyond categorical frames of “positive” and “negative” images. This aesthetic is also an approach to analyzing images that emphasizes expansive explorations into the complicated nuances, creative improvisations and alternative social logics that attend black life. In identifying and delineating appositional black aesthetics in works from Weems’s oeuvre, I further contend that her images provide a visual rendering of what Anthony Pinn argues is at the core of black religion: a fundamental impulse or yearning for more life meaning that involves a push for expansive ways of being and fuller life options. But whereas Pinn
frames the black religious endeavor as a “quest for complex subjectivity,” Weems’s renderings demonstrate ways of being and engaging with the world that exceed the fraught racialized classificatory paradigm of subjectivity. Rather than a quest for inclusion within subjectivity’s categorical schema, this project reframes the black religion as a generative enactment of the flesh. Informed by the work of Moten as well as Hortense Spillers and Nicole Fleetwood, this theoretical conceptualization situates black religion as the locus point of possibility for complex, open, ever-shifting ways of being that always already exceed the regulating social logics of dominant society and its prescribed ontologies.
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1.1. Introduction

Over the course of a career that spans more than 30 years, Carrie Mae Weems has established herself as a noted visual artist working in a range of mediums, including photography, fabric, audio, digital images and installation. Yet, it has been her photographic images of African American life in particular that has garnered her the most critical attention and, thus, will be the focus of this project. In her photographs, according to Henry Louis Gates, Jr., “one can feel the texture and physicality of the life she is portraying.”¹ For art critic Deborah Willis, among the various mediums in which the artist works, Weems’s tactical use of lighting, gesture and her own body in her

photographic images render the most poignant and critical challenges to ideas of beauty, desire, empire, domesticity and diaspora.² This project, which approaches the study of black religion through visual art, aesthetics and black critical theory, was indeed sparked by one of Weems’s images that carries this poignant criticality. The image, entitled *Portrait of a Woman*, is not a self-portrait, but a performance in which Weems herself stands in for the black woman at the center of the work. The woman is depicted seated on a bed facing the camera with her legs sprawled open, the underside of one of her thighs partially exposed. She holds a lit cigarette in one of her hands. In striking juxtaposition to the light, airy material of the woman’s dress and the bedsheets that surround her, a figure dressed in what appears to be a heavy dark trench coat is partially reflected in the mirror next to the bed. Above the woman’s head is a framed picture of a fire truck, a sign that the salacious tone of the image is intentional and unmitigated. Along the bottom of the photograph are the words, “Portrait of a woman who has fallen from grace and into the hands of evil.” The description is, without question, a damning one, one that assigns a pathological, moral depravity upon the woman pictured. This woman, the caption asserts, is the embodiment of a cautionary tale. And yet, strikingly, the naming power of the text does not go unchallenged. That is, its reproachful admonishment is undercut by the woman’s direct gaze and posture, but not so much in a way that implies an aspiration toward redemption. Rather, the woman’s gaze into the camera lens with a smirk running

across her lips as she extends her arm back to grasp the top of the brass bedpost all suggest that while she is aware of being held in moral judgment, she is resolutely unrepentant for her purported transgressions. Her playful smirk suggests the possibility that what is considered pathological—her sexuality—is a regenerative space of vulnerability, pleasure, chaos and desire.

The rich tension that Weems creates here between text and image that not only brings a one-dimensional, categorical interpretation of the black woman’s life into question, but that also presents possibility where there is otherwise considered to be none, typifies the core interest of this project. It demonstrates how visual images are generative sources in which to consider the nature and meaning of black religion. More specifically, Portrait of a Woman reflects what I conceive as an appositional black aesthetic that visually renders what I argue in this project is a defining feature of black religion: it presents points of possibility for complex, open, ever-shifting ways of being that always already exceed the regulating social logics of dominant society and its prescribed ontologies. Drawn from black critical theorist Fred Moten’s notion of appositionality, appositional black aesthetics refers to art and images that depict black life with complexity and a type of multidimensional openness that extends beyond categorical frames of “positive” and “negative” images. This aesthetic is also an approach to analyzing images that emphasizes expansive explorations into the complicated nuances, creative improvisations and alternative social logics that attend black life.

My conception of black religion is informed by the work of Anthony Pinn in Terror and Triumph: The Nature of Black Religion. In this work, Pinn deftly expands the study of black religion beyond the more traditional institutions and doctrines that
preoccupy much of black religious scholarship. Less concerned with delineating orthodox religious forms, Pinn’s central aim is to provide theoretical ground for what religion is. Black religion, he contends, is fundamentally “a quest for complex subjectivity.” That is, it is constituted by an impulse, or yearning, for more life meaning that involves a constant push for an expanding range of life options and movements. For black people in particular, it involves the historical struggle against the terror of white supremacist dehumanization of black bodies as objects through a reconstruction of black bodies as subjects. In positing this definition of religion that unhinges it from the strictures of institutions and doctrines, Pinn also expands the source materials through which religion can be interrogated. The black religious quest, he contends, not only takes the form of traditional religious institutions and doctrines, it also includes the myriad of other ways that people engage in continuous struggles for fuller lives, including through visual source materials and other forms of cultural production. In this way, Pinn’s treatise not only provides theoretical attention to black religion, it also calls for a broadening of the methodologies through which black religion is considered.

This work takes up this challenge through examining Weems’s oeuvre of conceptual photography as a case study for considering the nature of black religion. In so doing, however, it also presents an alternative conception of black religion. Whereas Pinn frames the black religious endeavor as a struggle for complex subjectivity, Weems’s

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4 Ibid, 142.
5 Ibid, 159.
renderings demonstrate ways of being and engaging with the world that exceed what black critical theorist Denise Ferreira da Silva identifies as the fraught racialized classificatory paradigm of subjectivity that requires and is constituted by black exclusion and social hierarchies of distinction. Rather than a quest for inclusion within subjectivity’s categorical schema, this project reframes black religion as being constituted by a generative enactment of the flesh. Informed by the work of Moten as well as Hortense Spillers and Nicole Fleetwood, this theoretical conceptualization situates the black religious endeavor as one concerned with complex ways of being that exceed subjectivity’s categorical aims.

Importantly, in proffering a critical view of subjectivity as an analytical category in this project, it is necessary to acknowledge from the outset the intellectual and even material risks involved in positing such a view. The hegemonic, patriarchal, hetero white supremacist effort to violently reduce black life to dehumanizing objecthood throughout history and into the present moment can never be overstated. Black history in the context of the United States and, certainly, throughout the globe is indeed a history of pushing against the everyday realities as well as the social, political and economic structures these efforts produce. From struggles for abolition to political efforts during Reconstruction, to the cultural work of the Harlem Renaissance, to the mass organizing for civil rights and self-determination during the Civil Rights, Black Power, and Black Lives Matter movements, what Pinn identifies as “perpetual rebellion” against dehumanizing forces in order to struggle toward social and political equity and the full benefits of citizenship is
in many ways part and parcel of black life.\textsuperscript{6} In light of this history, positing a challenge and critical view of inclusion within the dominant social order is to risk putting forth a project that could be understood as ahistorical at best and/or a concession to dehumanizing forces at worst.

Yet, this project neither seeks to deny or bracket the realities of black objectification and dehumanization by a range of systems and forces. Nor does it advocate for an abandonment of efforts to struggle against such realities. Rather, this project extends out of a vested interest in mining and theorizing the expansiveness of black life that, as Ashon Crawley aptly puts it, always already exists \textit{even as} it is objectified and violently acted upon in order to sustain the dominant social order.\textsuperscript{7} What does this expansiveness entail and look like? What forms of black social and relational configurations exist and are sustained alongside a system that requires and can only ever offer black and other marginalized communities an always precarious, if not diluted form of inclusion? And as Weems’s aforementioned performance suggests, what is to be said of a kind of complexity in black life that does not abide by regulating behavioral norms of the social order? These questions concerning black life in and beyond systems of domination are what inform and drive my conception of black religion.

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\textsuperscript{6} Pinn, 153.

1.2. Rationale for Study

This project makes two primary contributions to the scholarship on black religion: 1) it adds to efforts by scholars in the field to interrogate the nature of black religion using art and other visual forms of cultural production and 2) it attends to the lack of critical interrogation of “subjectivity” as an analytical category in the field, even as it is posited and theorized as a central component, if not aspiration, of black religion.

Scholars of black religion have long looked to forms of black cultural production as source material to make claims concerning the theological, ethical, and historical dimensions of black religion. James Cone based his articulation of Black Liberation Theology on the lyrical content and rhythms of the spirituals and the blues. In providing methodological ground for Womanist Theology and Ethics, Katie Cannon, Stacey Floyd-Thomas, and other Womanist scholars turned to black women’s fiction while Anthony Pinn and Monica Miller turned to hip hop music to theoretically delineate the nature of black religion. But while the field is ripe with scholarship that points to the religious significance of black cultural production, this scholarship is primarily focused on black literary and music traditions. With the exception of scholarship by Anthony Pinn on art

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and by Carole Duncan and Judith Weisenfeld on film, scholarship that rigorously engages visual and aesthetic methods, theories and source materials remains relatively scant.10 Thus, this project builds on the efforts by Pinn, Duncan and Weisenfeld to fill a “visual void”—to draw form what Michele Wallace famously observed about the absence of visual art in black cultural discourse more generally—among studies of cultural production in the field of black religion.11 This project is motivated by the contention that if there is much to be gained in understanding the nature of black religion from music and literary narratives, the same can be said for visual images. More specifically, by virtue of their particular aesthetic forms and mediums, images like those produced by Carrie Mae Weems bring to bear the embodied and visual aspects of black religion in ways that are otherwise not accessible through other forms of cultural production. In this project, I turn to scholars of photography, visual studies and aesthetics, such as Deborah Willis, Shawn Michelle Smith, Nicole Fleetwood and Tina Campt.

Though scholars of black religion, namely Stacey-Floyd Thomas and Antony Pinn, posit subjectivity as a core component of African American religion,


theology and ethics, the concept is largely uncritically theorized. In particular, their arguments tend to presuppose subjectivity as an aspiration of black religion, such that it is posited as means of survival and resistance in the context of oppressive forces. These conceptions, however, take for granted the way in which subjectivity is itself a racialized category that is steeped in a colonial history of signification and that produces the very oppressive forces and, in particular, the social hierarchies of power and domination that black religion seeks to subvert. Here, I will turn to the work of Da Silva in which she contends that the category of the subject emerged as an analytic category out of the 19th century post-Enlightenment colonial project that involved defining and securing European particularity in relation to the rest of the globe. In particular, this was secured through the notion that European subjects maintained a self-determining rational mind in constitutive contrast to the affectable minds of Europe’s global others. In noting the constitutive nature of this configuration, Da Silva argues that the concept of subjectivity is something of a paradigm. That is, notions of the self-determining, rational subject require a conception of affectable, inferior “others” in order to maintain its legitimacy. This project critically considers these racial and colonialist classificatory underpinnings of subjectivity. Moreover, through an analysis of Weems’s images, it will argue for a conception of black religion that involves endeavors toward indeterminate ways of being

that continually evade and rupture the imposed parameters around black life, including subjectivity and its regulating social logics.

1.3. Chapter Overview

In Chapter 2, the opening chapter of this dissertation, entitled “Appositional Black Aesthetics,” I turn to Carrie Mae Weems’s 1984 series Family Pictures and Stories to develop my concept of appositional black aesthetics. Here, I begin by giving historical attention to the ways in which demeaning photographs of black life, particularly those created as part of “race science,” were used to produce and reinforce the logics of racial classification and racist ideology. It is in and up against this history, I contend, that critics and historians of black photography by and large situate and interpret black photographs created by black people within an oppositional black aesthetic framework. This framework was aimed toward redefining and reclaiming how black life was viewed and recognized by employing the camera to disprove degrading white representations of black people through the creation of “true-to-life images.” Finally, I read Family Pictures through an appositional black aesthetic approach and its focus on complex black images, arguing that Weems’s images reflect the ways in which black social life provides the context out of which the black religious endeavor for more expansive ways of being emerges.

In Chapter 3, entitled “Black Religion as Enactments of the Flesh,” I continue my explication of appositional black aesthetics by demonstrating how the aesthetics appears in Weems’s 1990 work entitled, Kitchen Table Series. In particular, I contend that this aesthetic appears through the rigorous back-and-forth, text and image that produces
complex, contradictory claims concerning the black female protagonist at the center of the series. Black religion comes into view by way of this aesthetic representation of the complicated range of personal characteristics and perspectives that orient the black woman’s life and thus render her capacity for complex ways of being that elude and exceed hard-and-fast representational categorizations. I go further to argue that inasmuch as the appositional black aesthetic at work in *Kitchen Table* reflects Pinn’s idea of black religion, it also complicates its conceptual framing. That is, the theoretical grounding of this aesthetic in Fred Moten’s idea of “appositionality” necessarily calls for an alternative way in which to conceive of the black religious endeavor beyond what I will delineate through Da Silva as the fraught classificatory paradigm of subjectivity. I then turn a more focused attention to Weems’s performance of the protagonist in the series, arguing that the work offers this alternative through her performance of what visual theorist Nicole Fleetwood refers to as “excess flesh enactments.” These performances, in which the artist renders her own body as the focus of the viewer’s gaze, expose the limits of the regulating aims of the visual field that classify black people according to subjectivity’s racialized paradigmatic frame. Rather than categorically classified within this paradigm, the depiction of the protagonist characterizes her as one who relishes in the rich possibility of black female excessiveness that continually breaches the classificatory confines of the dominant social order. Thus, this chapter posits the black religious push for fuller, expansive ways of being as a generative enactment of the flesh. In this theoretical conceptualization, black religion becomes the locus point of possibility for ways of being that exceed and render inadequate any effort to be fully calculated or
grasped according to the regulating social logics of dominant society and its prescribed ontologies.

Chapter 4, “Taking Up Space: Performances of Black Religion in and beyond Edifices of Power,” continues my explication of black religion as enactments of the flesh by interrogating the spatial logics that attend subjectivity. Here, I turn to Weems’s 2006 piece entitled, Roaming, in which she stands between and up against structurally imposing edifices of Italian Rationalist architecture in the city of Rome. Weems embodies a black female figure who stands in stark diminutive contrast to monumental edifices that, I argue, represent the way in which the racialized paradigm of subjectivity is a spatialized project. I turn to architectural theory to make the case that at work in subjectivity as an analytical category are logics of spatialization that are reflected in 18th century foundational features of rationalist architectural design and its emphasis on simplicity over ornamentation, symmetry and geometric form. These spatial logics of subjectivity conceive of the European subject as maintaining an ordered, coherent interiority that distinctly contrasts with the purportedly chaotic, uncontrollable exteriority of black and colonized populations. Weems’s performative positioning of her black female body against Italian Rationalist structures that reflect 18th century foundational features of rationalism, specifically the Palazzo dei Congressi and the Palazzo della Civiltà Italiana, demonstrates these spatialized logics. I contend that even as the black female figure is suggestive of the black exteriority and displacement against which the interior subject is spatially defined, she at the same time embodies geographic potential and possibility through her performance of what Daphne Brooks refers to as “spectacular opacity” as well as what Tina Campt refers to as “stasis.” This contestation constitutes a
generative enactment of the flesh that defines and animates the black religious push for meaning and fuller, expansive ways of being and moreover, points towards the possibility of alternative black geographies.

I conclude this dissertation with Chapter 5, entitled “Black Landscapes.” Here, I consider Weems’s 1991 work entitled Sea Island Series. If the black woman figure in Roaming signals the possibility of alternative black geographies beyond the spatial logics of subjectivity, Weems’s landscape images of the Georgia and South Carolina Gullah-Geechee lowcountry depict these black geographic possibilities. I begin by considering the historical conventions and assumptions of landscape photography that are premised upon conceptions of nature as “pure,” “transparent,” and separate from human activity and intervention. I contend that Weems upends these conceptions through images that foreground the lowcountry social world in and through nature. These images, I further argue, challenge hard-and-fast distinctions between humanity and the natural world that are premised upon humanity’s conquest and dominion over nature. The work depicts a relationship between humanity and nature that is constituted by interconnection and overlap. The Sea Island Series thus attests to black geographic and spatial knowledges that exist, to draw from Katherine McKittrick, in and alongside terrains of domination.
Chapter 2

Appositional Black Aesthetics

When we are not “public,” with all that the word connotes for black people, then how do we live and who are we? –Elizabeth Alexander

I went back home this summer. Hadn’t seen my folks for awhile, but I’d been thinking about them, felt a need to say something about them, about us, about me and to record something about our family, our history. I was scared. Of what? I don’t know, but on my first night back, I was welcomed with so much love from Van and Vera, that I thought to myself, “Girl, this is your family. Go on and get down.” –from Carrie Mae Weems, *Family Pictures and Stories*
2.1. Rethinking Black Images: Black Religion through Appositional Black Aesthetics

In her 1984 work entitled *Family Pictures and Stories*, Carrie Mae Weems makes the proverbial journey “back home.” The artist spent much of the mid to late 1970s shuttling back and forth between San Francisco and the then-newly established Studio Museum in Harlem, where she took classes with photographer Dawoud Bey and participated in the lively community engagement with the work of black artists and writers hosted by the museum.\(^{13}\) Along with Bey, Weems was also particularly inspired by the documentary images of black life created by the likes of Roy DeCarava, Anthony Barboza, Shawn Walker and other members of the Harlem-based Kamoinge Workshop.\(^{14}\)

\(^{13}\) Dawoud Bey, “Carrie Mae Weems.” *Bomb* 108 (Summer 2009). Accessed August 5, 2015. http://bombmagazine.org/articles/carrie-mae-weems/. Prior to her class with Bey, Weems studied photography and design at San Francisco City College from 1974-76. Although her studies, along with the Studio Museum and her involvement in their programming were formative for Weems’s development as a photographer, the Black Photographer’s Annual, a four-part volume first published in the early 1970s, was significant in her initial introduction to the work of black photographers. For more on the origins and context of the Black Photographer’s Annual, see Deborah Willis, Reflections in Black: A History of Black Photographers 1840 to the Present (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2000) and John Edwin Mason, “An Annual Compendium of Black Photography that was a Revolutionary Act” Hyperallergic (August 2017). Accessed December 2017. https://hyperallergic.com/393569/black-photographs-annual-virginia-museum-fine-arts/.

The group, co-founded in 1963 by DeCarava, employed a photographic aesthetic that was somewhat different from Civil Rights documentary photography that pervaded the same period.\textsuperscript{15} While photographers such as Doug Harris, Moneta Sleet, Jr. and Elaine Tomlin made strategic use of the persuasive, evidentiary power widely associated with the documentary genre to expose the violent evils of racism and segregation as well as resistance marches and demonstrations, images created by members of the Kamoinge Workshop often maintained a more interior, meditative quality.\textsuperscript{16} Their images of urban everyday-life/.

For more on the work of Anthony Barboza, see Anthony Barboza, \textit{Introspect: The Photographs of Anthony Barboza} (New York: The Studio Museum in Harlem, 1982).

\textsuperscript{15} Deborah Willis notes that the decade of the1960s saw a groundswell of black photographers that pursued institutional training in documentary and social landscape photography in an effort to capture the social concerns of black communities as the Civil Rights Movement reached a fever pitch. Photographers such as Doug Harris, who photographed for the Student Nonviolence Coordinating Committee, Moneta Sleet, Jr. Elaine Tomlin and Joe Flowers all followed in the celebrated tradition cemented by early black documentarians Gordon Parks and Charles “Teenie” Harris. See \textit{Reflections in Black}, 111-112. Cultural historian Maurice Berger argues for the ways in which the images created by these and other photographers would awaken social consciousness about the distinctly brutal and violent nature of racism. According to Berger, these images included photographs of police dogs tearing into the flesh of well-dressed, non-violent Civil Rights protestors as well as images of school-age black children being assaulted with police water cannons. They also included Moneta Sleet’s famous image of a grieving Coretta Scott King and young Bernice King at the funeral of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Berger also gives particular attention to Mamie Till strategic allowance of images of her son Emmit Till’s open casket. See Maurice Berger, \textit{For All the World to See: Visual Culture and the Struggle for Civil Rights} (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010).

\textsuperscript{16} Cultural historian Maurice Berger argues for the ways in which images created by Civils Rights photographers awakened social consciousness about the distinctly brutal and violent nature of racism. According to Berger, these images included photographs of police dogs tearing into the flesh of well-dressed, non-violent protestors as well as images of police assaulting school-age black children with water cannons. They also included Moneta Sleet, Jr.’s famous image of a grieving Coretta Scott King and young Bernice King at the funeral of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Berger also gives particular attention to Mamie Till’s strategic allowance of images of her son Emmit Till’s open casket. See
grittiness and everyday black life had a way of defying categorical representations of black life, such that, as historian John Edwin Mason observes, their images neither reflected negative stereotypes of black life or the more clichéd notions of the black people as the “patient victim” or “righteous hero.” Their photographs, according to Mason, sought to reflect both “the burdens and the pleasures of moving through America in a black body.”

Weems was among many young black artists, including her contemporaries Lorna Simpson and Willie Robert Middlebrook, informed by this rich tradition of black-image making in the documentary genre. Seeking to further her

Maurice Berg, *For All the World to See: Visual Culture and the Struggle for Civil Rights* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010).


18 Ibid.

19 Cherise Smith, “Fragmented Documents: Works by Lorna Simpson, Carrie Mae Weems and Willie Robert Middlebrook at the Art Institute of Chicago,” *Art Institute of Chicago Museum Studies* 24 (1999): 244-259. Smith argues that Simpson, Weems and Middlebrook share a similar history and approach to documentary photography. Informed by DeCarava’s work, they were all initially drawn to communicative, social aspects of the genre, but eventually began to interrogate and critique the objectivity and authority associated with it. In particular, they combined documentary photography with a mixed media approach that involved weaving together materials from different sources. Smith posits that this technique worked to subvert the authority of documentary photographs and assert an African American identity. For more on the work of Lorna Simpson, see Beryl J. Wright and Saidiya V. Hartman, *Lorna Simpson: For the Sake of the Viewer* (New York: Universe Pub, 1992), Lorna Simpson and Coco Fusco, “Lorna Simpson” *Bomb* (Fall 1997): 50-55, Okwui Enwezor, *Lorna Simpson* (New York: American Federation for the Arts, 2006). See also, Zan Dubin, “He Sets His Sights on Reality:
interest in the genre, she enrolled in the Master’s program in the visual arts department at
the University of California, San Diego (UCSD) in 1981. There, Weems began to
rethink the genre of documentary and approach photography as a conceptual practice. As
part of her studies at UCSD, Weems returned home to her native Portland, Oregon to
make her family the subject of her master’s thesis, an intermedia installation containing
audio, text and image that would become *Family Pictures*, her first major work, and
establish her presence as a conceptual artist.

To view the series while in exhibition is not merely to walk through a collection
of images, it is to have the feeling of *entering into* and observing the ongoing, boisterous
life of a particular family. To be sure, the black and white family snapshots—taken with
35-millimeter film that, as critic Andrea Kirsh points out, gives the images “an aesthetic
of informality and temporality”—that capture gatherings and family members in both
private and public spaces most immediately evoke this affect. The epigraph above in
which Weems recounts her initial anxiety and eventual sense of comfort and familiarity

Willie Robert Middlebrook’s Works, now on display at OCC, Refute Negative
robert-middlebrook

Prior to enrolling at UCSD, Weems completed a Bachelor of Fine Art at the California
Institute of the Arts.

My observations about the installation are based on viewing *Family Pictures* while it
was on view at the California African American Art Museum in Los Angeles, CA in
December 2017. The series was part of the traveling exhibition entitled, “We Wanted a
Revolution: Black Women Artists, 1965-1985” curated by Catherine Morris and Rujeko
Hockley.

Andrea Kirsh, “Carrie Mae Weems: Issues in Black, White and Color” in Andrea Kirsh
of Women in the Arts, 1993), 12.
upon arriving home appears in the series in the form of a text caption that accompanies an enlarged image of two black women. Pictured outside in what is presumably a parking lot or driveway, the women exuberantly approach the camera with wide smiles across their faces. One woman’s mouth is open, as if expressing a verbal exaltation. The way in which their enlarged image is situated—that is, surrounded by smaller framed images of other family members—gives the two women a magnified presence in the series. As the viewer initially approaches the work, it is difficult to escape their exuberant faces. In this way, the women function as a kind of welcoming brigade; they not only greet Weems as she arrives home, but they also usher the viewer into the work, into a rendering of the experiences, logics, histories, practices, and personalities that constitute the lifeworld of their family.

As the viewer moves in closer to take in the text captions that accompany many of the smaller images, the sense that one is traversing into the goings-on of a particular familial universe is further compounded by the language and content of the text and audio dimensions of the work. Most of the typed captions assume a casual familiarity with those pictured and read as though they are transcribed from oral utterances in the black vernacular tradition. For instance, one image of a man holding an infant is captioned with the text: “Terry Lee with his babygirl.” Terry Lee’s exact identity in the context of the family is seemingly beside the point. The captions, after all, are not there to provide an ordered, systematic identification of family members or a concise mapping of the family tree. Rather, in a strikingly casual and somewhat haphazard way, they register the various and complex personalities that make up the family. Thus, while the viewer gains access to the family life, it is a mitigated access, such that many details and exact identities are
left amorphous and incomplete. Accompanying the viewer as they take in the images and read the text captions is the sound of an audiotape of women speaking, which plays from a speaker hanging above the installation. The women verbally chronicle family lore and the migration narratives of family members. Even though, by all indications, the women knew their conversation was being taped by the artist, the play of the recording on an endless loop in the exhibition, leaves the viewer with the sense that they are eavesdropping on an intimate, ongoing conversation that narrates the family life in the context of the larger social and political world.

Curator and critic Susan Fisher Sterling’s observations about Weems’s series provide a frame of reference in which to situate my sense of the stakes of *Family Pictures*. Through the work, Sterling posits, Weems defines herself within the context of a specific familial culture. That is, the artist depicts the “interior life” of her family by “affirming its relationships and remembrances, acknowledging its conflicts and contradictions.” Indeed, Weems’s series is a striking depiction of the everyday family life and the rich interiority of black existence. It is in this way that the work both anticipates Elizabeth Alexander’s inquiry and ventures to reflect what the poet and essayist theorizes in response: how black people live and who we are is worked out and reflected in the inner space of “the black interior,” that zone outside of how we are seen in the larger culture. It is a zone, according to Alexander, beyond the public face of stereotype and limited imagination.”


24 Ibid, x.
spaces of black life that allow black people to envision and tap into “complex black
selves, real and enactable black power, rampant and unfetishized black beauty.”

This chapter adds depth and dimension to Sterling’s observations by interrogating the
particular contours of black interior life as presented in Weems’s audio-text-image
installation. More specifically, I argue that this rendering has aesthetic significance, such
that it reflects what I call an “appositional black aesthetic” through its artistic projection
of the complicated nuances, creative improvisations, alternative social logics, and even
what might be considered the unseemly vagaries that attend black social life.

In proffering a black aesthetic premised upon “apposition,” I draw from black
critical theorist Fred Moten’s notion that black life inhabits an “undercommon
appositionality.” Here, Moten posits potential and possibility in black alienation from
dominant civil society, or the status of nonbeing or nothingness. Blackness, Moten
argues, is appositional, such that it inhabits “a space off to the side or outside-from-the-
outside” of civil society. To be appositional is to be “situated nowhere,” it is to embrace
a nothingness that—distinct from the controlled, self-possessed body of bourgeois
comportment by which civil society marks and defines itself—is characterized by a
“fleshy dispossession” that is “without reserve, independent of the desire to show up in
and for the conventional optics wherein somebody is delineated and identified.”

Ibid.

Fred Moten, “Blackness and Nothingness (Mysticism in the Flesh)” The Southern
Atlantic Quarterly (Fall 2013): 756.


Ibid.
from this appositional, fleshy dispossession that an irreducible black social life emerges, one that involves improvisational, disorderly, indeterminate ways of being that render inadequate any effort to be fully calculated, framed or grasped according to dominant social orderings and their prescribed ontologies.\(^{29}\) To be sure, such a conception of blackness is coded as “pathological” or a “problem” when held up against what are to be considered the more stable, civilized ways of being that are pursuant with dominant social logics. But, Moten insists, “some folks relish being a problem.”\(^{30}\)

Informed by these theorizations, an appositional black aesthetic refers to art and images that depict black life with complexity and a multidimensional openness that extends beyond or, to use a phrase from Moten, \textit{in excess} of binary representational frames and prescribed social norms and designations. It is also an approach to viewing and analyzing images that, drawing from the critically important work of black cultural studies scholar Terrion Williamson, is driven by rigorous, expansive explorations into how black life is lived rather than how it is publicly viewed or policed.\(^{31}\) Here, Williamson’s conception of “black social life” is foundational to the primary concern of an appositional black aesthetic. To speak of black social life, she posits, is to speak of the “radical capacity to live—to live deeply righteous lives even in the midst of all that brings death close.”\(^{32}\) Black social life, she contends, is not reducible to the terror that

\(^{29}\) Ibid.
\(^{30}\) Moten, The Case of Blackness, 187.
\(^{32}\) Ibid, 9.
calls it into existence; it is “the multifaceted artifact of black communal resistance that is expressed in black idioms, cultural forms, traditions and ways of being.”\textsuperscript{33} Importantly, in its emphasis on black social life, appositional black aesthetics do not deny or even bracket the existence and violent force of dominant social orderings upon black lives. It is an approach that, drawing from Williamson, interrogates the ways in which black folks go about creating and living into alternative ways of being and social configurations because of and in excess of these larger forces and what they allow.\textsuperscript{34}

The appositional black aesthetic concern with explorations into how black life is lived over and against how it is publicly viewed or policed marks the critical intervention appositional black aesthetics make into the discourse concerning black images, specifically black photography.\textsuperscript{35} That is, appositional black aesthetics depart from the “oppositional” framework through which the discourse has largely come to understand and articulate “the work” of black photographic images. This framework—articulated by bell hooks, but as I will discuss, is characteristic of much of the discourse concerning black image-making—posits black images as a “counter-hegemonic world of images” that defy the white colonizing eye by visually resisting and challenging racist, stereotypical images and visual perceptions.\textsuperscript{36} It is a framework that, to be sure, speaks to

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{33} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{34} Ibid, 15-16.
\textsuperscript{35} When using the terms “black images” or “black photography,” I refer specifically to images of black people created by black people.
\end{flushright}
the creative ingenuity through which black people strategically opposed degrading imagery and imagined themselves anew. Yet, as Williamson astutely points out and as I will attend to in my historiographical attention to the history of black photography that follows, an aesthetic framework premised upon opposition tends to limit the discourse concerning black photography to questions concerning the extent to which a particular image conforms to or pushes against a given stereotype or trope. This produces an overdetermined black visual discourse that is preoccupied with the dichotomous representational categories of “positive” and “negative” images. What results, then, is what scholar of visual culture Nicole Fleetwood identifies as a kind of “representational weight” often placed on black photographs to alter and subvert demeaning imagery through the creation of images that tell the “truth” about “authentic” black life. This weight works to constrain what can be said about the nature of black life. Williamson aptly and succinctly articulates this limitation this way: “[Critics] become so invested in saying what black people are not—they are not angry, they are not lazy, they are not violent, they are not hypersexual—that it becomes difficult to fathom who black people are, other than, perhaps, the inverse of every negative thing that has ever been said about them.”

In addition to the aforementioned limitations posited by Fleetwood and Williamson, —and more importantly for my particular interests in Weems’s informal

37 Williamson, 16.
39 Williamson, 17.
family photographs—the primary focus on the oppositional nature of black images also creates a blind-spot in the discourse concerning black photography: how are we to engage and interpret black images that are not readily identifiable along the positive/negative continuum? What is to be made of black photographs that are not principally concerned with salvaging the black public image or, in the tradition of black documentary photography during the mid-20th century struggle for civil rights, with providing persuasive evidence of the terror and perils of white racism? How do we account for images that are unmappable within the binary, positive/negative paradigm that structures the archive of black representation? In its explorations into how black life is lived in the rich, complicated sphere of black social life, an appositional black aesthetic offers a way in which to analytically shore up these voids and blind-spots. It makes way for a more expansive understanding of what black images can tell us concerning who black people are and how their lives are constituted. In particular, my view of Family Pictures through this framework will demonstrate the ways in which the aesthetic allows for an

40 The archive I reference here is in relation to Williamson’s notion of the “binary regulatory regimes” of positive/negative images that structures the archive of black public representation. See Williamson, 17. While somewhat indirectly related to my argument here, Leigh Raiford draws from the work of Allan Sekula to argue that there exists a “shadow archive” of black representation. Similar to Sekula’s argument concerning the way in which portraits are always already read and gain their meaning through their relation to the criminal mugshot, Raiford contends that formal portraits of African Americans, specifically in the 19th century, were created in response to and gain a type of meaning when held up against the prevalence of lynching photography and popular derogatory images. Here, she focuses specifically on Ida B. Wells’s strategic use of portraits and photographs in her anti-lynching campaigns. See Leigh Raiford, “Ida B. Wells and the Shadow Archive” in Maurice O. Wallace and Shawn Michelle Smith, Pictures and Progress: Early Photography and the Making of African American Identity (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), 299-320. See also Allan Sekula, “The Body and the Archive” October 39 (Winter 1986), 3-64.
interrogation into the complex ways of being as well as the alternative social logics and configurations that attend black life. In so doing, I contend, this aesthetic resituates the significance of black visual images in theorizing the nature and meaning of black religion.

Scholars of religion have identified the modes through which black people confront racist depictions and lay claim to identities that oppose those imposed upon them as having monumental significance for how to understand the nature and meaning of black religion. Historian of religions Charles Long defines religion as being fundamentally concerned with “how one comes to terms with the ultimate significance of their place in the world.” For historically oppressed peoples, this involves “crawling back” to the point prior to their creation as “other” in the context of Western colonization in order to “re-signify” themselves. More specifically, Long argues, it involves challenging conceptions and depictions of colonized peoples and cultures as inferior by creating themselves anew through their own symbols, signs, behaviors and rhythms. Building from Long, religion scholar Anthony Pinn puts forth a theory of religion that more robustly illuminates the religious significance of resisting racist depictions. Pinn defines black religion as the historical struggle against the terror of white supremacist dehumanization of black bodies as objects through a reconstruction of black bodies as

42 Ibid, 127.
43 Ibid. For Long, black religion includes what he refers to as “extrachurch orientations” of black religious life, such as motivations, intentions, behaviors, styles and rhythms.
Here, he makes the case that intentional, sustained “rituals of reference,” such as the slave auction block and lynching, solidified the status of black people as objects, as “nonbeings,” and relegated them to “social death,” or alienation from dominant society. Black religion, then, is the wrestling against forces of objectification; it is a wrestling that is driven by a fundamental impulse, or push for life meaning and more expansive ways of being “as opposed to reified notions of identity that mark dehumanization.” Among the methods that Pinn offers for examining this theory of religion (what he refers to as “the quest for complex subjectivity”) is visual and decorative arts. In an analysis that dovetails with hooks’s notion of an oppositional black aesthetic, Pinn posits that because of their critical role in the objectification of black people, art and other forms of expressive cultural production are also spaces in which to find and examine the struggle against such dehumanization and the reclamation of black bodies. The work of many black artists reflects the communal and moral dimensions of black life denied by larger society. In so doing, their images “rescue” and recreate black people in marked distinction from the dehumanizing stereotypical ways in which they were typically depicted. Thus, black visual images provide a significant register through which to view and consider the meaning of black religion.

46 Ibid, 158.
47 Ibid, 150.
Yet, in thinking with Pinn’s conception of black religion, an interpretation of black images based solely on a framework of opposition short-circuits an analysis of black religion. While it provides a way in which to consider black visual struggles against dehumanizing depictions and imposed, degrading identities, an emphasis on opposing racist depictions leaves little in the way of interrogating the aspect of black religion that involves laying claim to “more expansive ways of being.” What do these ways of being—ones that extend beyond, as Pinn notes, “the parameters of good sense and good taste as defined by whites”—look like and entail? An appositional black aesthetic enables an analysis of the expansive breadth of black ways of being that are so central to black religion. Importantly, however, this aesthetic not only allows for a fuller visual exploration into Pinn’s conception of religion, it also pushes the conception further by locating the particular context out of which the black religious push for more expansive ways of being emerges. While black religion, as Pinn conceives it, works to push against the terror and degradation meted out upon black life by white supremacist structures, he notes that it is something more than a reactionary response to such structures. Viewing images through an appositional black aesthetic framework provides a way in which to more precisely situate the black religious endeavor. That is, appositional black aesthetics put forth depictions of multidimensional, expansive ways of being that are principally formed not so much in the crucible of struggle and opposition to white supremacy, but rather in the improvisational space of black social life. It is a black social life constituted by “alternative modes, alternative strategies, alternative ways of life” that always already exists, indeed even it is violently acted upon in order to sustain the logics of the dominant
order. In positing an appositional black aesthetic at work in the familial lifeworld that is rendered in Carrie Mae Weems’s *Family Pictures*, I locate black social life as the fundamental ground and context out of which the black religious push toward complex, expansive ways of being emerges.

In the first section that follows, I give historical attention to the ways in which demeaning photographs of black life, particularly those created a part of the “race science” project, were used to produce and reinforce the logics of racial classification and racist ideology. It is in and up against this history, I argue in the second section, that critics and historians of black photography by and large situate and interpret black photographs created by black people within an oppositional black aesthetic framework. In the third section, I read *Family Pictures* through an oppositional black aesthetic approach, arguing that the images reflect the ways in which black social life provides the context out of which the black religious quest for more expansive ways of being emerges.

### 2.2. Photography as a Tool of Racial Classification and Racist Ideology

**Ideology**

Before delving into the ways in which the discourse on the history of black photography is largely dominated by questions concerning the precariousness of black

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representation and public image, it is necessary in this section to delineate the critical necessity of such discourse. As the work of historians of black visual culture and photography attests, the long and storied history of black image-making did not emerge in a contextual vacuum. The tradition of black photographs created by black people—which, as historian Deborah Willis points out, dates back to the very invention of photographic technology in 1839—has coexisted with a larger cultural milieu wherein art and other visual mediums were employed to advance white supremacy.\footnote{Deborah Willis, \textit{Reflections in Black}, 25.}

According to Michael Harris, the centrality of visual images to the construction of race, racial difference, and racialized social hierarchies in the United States cannot be overstated. The development of modern racial constructions hinged on the ability to assert that racial difference is not only “known,” but also “visible.”\footnote{Michael Harris, \textit{Colored Pictures: Race and Visual Representation} (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 7.} To this end, black people were rendered a discredited signifier in American visual culture, such that images of black life were used to signify degenerate conduct, ethics and appearance.\footnote{Ibid. See also Sander L. Gilman, \textit{Difference and Pathology: Stereotypes of Sexuality, Race, and Madness} (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985). In his discussion of the iconography of black sexuality in 18th and 19th century art, Gilman notes that figures of black servants in the artwork tend to signal the presence of illicit sexuality. Here, he makes reference to Edouard Manet’s \textit{Olympia} as well as William Hogarth’s \textit{A Rake’s Progress} and \textit{A Harlot’s Progress}.} This has perhaps been most widely examined and readily evident in the stereotypical tropes through which black people were visually depicted in 19th and into early 20th century American popular culture. Historians, literary critics and film scholars have distilled...
these tropes down into select types that include Sambo, Coon, Rastus, Tom, Uncle, Mammy and Buck. Cartoons regularly contained in 19th century publications of *Harper’s Weekly*, for instance, are emblematic of the ways in which racial difference was established and reinforced through visual depictions of these tropes. In particular, black people in the cartoons were regularly depicted with some of the characteristics associated with the Sambo figure: simple, lazy, eternally childlike, passive and mindlessly jovial. Perhaps most notable among such cartoons was the caricatured black family referred to as “The Smallbreeds of Blackville.” Illustrated with their mouths agape, appearing less than fully aware and in a blissful state of ignorance, the family lives in rustic, spare...

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52 Jan Nederveen Pieterse, *White on Black: Images of Africa and Blacks in Western Popular Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 152-156. According to Pieterse, the figure of the black Sambo dates back early 19th century stories, jokes, minstrel shows and later films and advertising. The figure was the prototype of the carefree black that was eternally childlike and dependent, impervious to pain and incapable of anger. The Coon and Rastus figures are variations on this figure. While the trope of the Tom portrayed black men as faithful, happily subservient, loyal servants who depend on whites for approval, the trope of the Uncle was a similar figure associated with Uncle Remus, a character in the late 19th century folktales of Joel Chandler Harris. Uncle Remus was an “old plantation Negro,” a symbol of plantation nostalgia that epitomized white ideal memories of slavery and the ante-bellum period. Similar to Uncle, the Mammy trope promoted images of black women as contented female slaves, yet the figure was also superstitious, obese, somewhat cantankerous, and fiercely independent. While the mammy figure was asexual and devoted her life to the care of white children, the figure of the Buck was one that characterized black men as hypersexual “superstuds,” the ever-present threat to the sexual sanctity associated with white womanhood. For more on tropes of black people in 19th and early 20th century literature, film, popular culture and advertising, see also Sterling Brown, *The Negro in American Fiction: Negro Poetry and Drama* (New York: Arno Press, 1969), Daniel Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattos, Mammys and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2001), Marilyn Kern-Foxworth, *Aunt Jemima. Uncle Ben and Rastus: Black in Advertising, Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow* (London: Greenwood Press, 1994).

53 Pieterse, 152.

54 Harris, 57.
conditions that are depicted as an outcome of their biological shortcomings and not as a result of racial discrimination. Their exaggerated dialect depicted in the cartoon signified the popular racist notion that blacks aspired toward upward social mobility through comical, foolish mimicry of whites, thus signaling their fundamental inability to fully and appropriately participate in American society.\(^{55}\)

While weekly newspaper cartoons played a profound role in ushering racial classifications and racist ideology into popular culture, the incorporation of these degrading, stereotypical tropes into advertisements and marketing strategies for commercial products made racist ideology and classification even more of a ubiquitous, defining feature of everyday American life. The caricature of Aunt Jemima, a less headstrong, more jovial version of the Mammy trope, was perhaps the most pervasive image of blackness during the late 19\(^{th}\) century and well into the early 20\(^{th}\) century.\(^{56}\) Personified as a docile black woman domestic cook and servant, the image of Aunt Jemima had its beginnings as a character in minstrel shows, a popular form of entertainment rooted in white fascination and horror with blackness and that involved mockery of black performance styles.\(^{57}\) The image took on heightened prevalence to the extent that it became

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\(^{55}\) Ibid.


deeply embedded in American consciousness when it drawings and animated images of Aunt Jemima were incorporated into advertising for commercial products, including and perhaps most notably, self-rising pancake mix.\textsuperscript{58} The image of an ever-smiling, large black woman, standing at ready, donning an apron and holding a spatula reflected white cultural conceptions of the proper social role and function of black people in American society: as happy, devoted, perpetually servile and without emotional depth or dimension.\textsuperscript{59} The image also propped up the notion of idealized womanhood as white and pubescent through a visual rendering of black women as embodying the constitutive opposite: elderly and genderless.\textsuperscript{60} This invented, visualized persona not only appeared on storefronts, billboards, and replicated in the form of dolls and other material products, it was included in the 1893 World’s Columbian Exposition, a space where the United

\begin{flushright}
\\textsuperscript{58} Harris, 88.
\textsuperscript{59} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{60} Ibid, 100-101.
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Press, 1998), Stephen Burge Johnson, \textit{Burnt Cork: Traditions and Legacies of Black Face Minstrelsy} (Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2012). It was while viewing a minstrel show in 1889 that was put on by the blackface minstrel comedians known as Baker and Farell that Chris Rutt, one of the creators of the self-rising, or “ready-made,” pancake mix, initially got the idea to organize their advertising strategy around the figure of Aunt Jemima. The show included a performance of the New Orleans-style cakewalk to a tune called “Aunt Jemima,” a song made popular by well-known black minstrel performer Billy Kersands. During their performance, Baker dressed in an apron and a red bandana, reminiscent of a black cook on a southern plantation. In this figure, Rutt found the projection he sought to use in advertisements for his pancake mix, one that elicited notions of comfort, hospitality, plantation nostalgia. He would use not only the name “Aunt Jemima” from the minstrel show, but also the visual wide-eyed, grinning caricature of the figure from the Baker and Farrell performance posters as the trademark for his one-pound paper sacks of pancake mix. Marquette, 142-143 and Kern-Foxworth, 64-65.
States used visual mediums to define itself and its achievements among other countries.61

As Harris argues, the presence of the Aunt Jemima visual image in the American exhibition attested to the fundamental place of strict racial hierarchies in American identity.62 It also speaks to the centrality of visual images in the effort to justify and define the contours of American racialized social orderings.

61 Ibid, 68, 88-89. Although the figure of Aunt Jemima was an invented caricature, later owners of the brand, including R. T. Davis, would employ living black women to embody the role of the caricature in advertising efforts. Nancy Green, a former enslaved woman from Kentucky, was the first to take on the act and persona. The brand organized a promotional exhibition around her dramatization of the caricature at the 1839 World’s Columbian Exposition. The exhibition involved Green conducting a pancake making demonstration, singing songs, and telling scripted stories of the “Old South” while greeting visitors. Her performance was considered such a success that she would traveled around the country performing the figure at fairs, food shows and festivals. For more on the black women who embodied Aunt Jemima as part of the brand advertisement, see Kern-Foxworth, 66-70. Visual representations of racist ideology and racial hierarchies did not stop at the Aunt Jemima figure at the 1893 World’s Columbian Exposition. According to Harris, displays in the area of the fair called the Midway Plaisance were organized to graphically present and model villages that introduced fair visitors to populations considered to be the lower groups of humanity. Organized by showman Sol Bloom, the area displayed simulated “living” ethnological villages that included a Dahomey Village, a Chinese Tea House, a street in Cairo, a Moorish Palace, and a Turkish Village. Villages that included Germany, Holland and Austria. The villages were situated in a way that reflected the Darwinian evolutionary ladder of humanity: from the so-called savagery of Africans and Native Americans to the more civilized populations of Europe. For more on racist ideology and classification at the World’s Columbian Exposition, see also J. A. Mitchell, “Types and People at the Fair” in Frank D. Millet, J. A. Mitchell, Will H. Low, W. Hamilton Gibson, F. Hopkinson Smith, Some Artists at the Fair (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1893), Robert W. Rydell, “Rediscovering the 1893 Chicago World’s Columbian Exposition,” in Carolyn Kinder Carr and George Gurney, Revisiting the White City: American Art at the 1893 World’s Fair (Washington, D.C.: National Museum of American Art/National Portrait Art Gallery, 1993).

62 Harris, 88.
While popular cartoons and animated advertisements that featured black caricatures contributed to both formulating and reflecting the 19th and 20th century racial imagination, importantly for this chapter, the medium of photography played a particular role in visual constructions of race and racist ideology. More specifically, photography was a significant tool in the early development of scientific disciplines and the effort to biologically measure, classify and order racial groups. Importantly, as the medium advanced as a form of technology it did so in the context of both Western colonial expansion and, relatedly, the formation of ethnology and anthropology as fields of study. This period, particularly the latter half of the 19th century, saw considerable European expansion and consolidation across the globe, giving Europeans unprecedented cultural contact with non-Europeans and cultural difference. This expansion, as visual and historical anthropologist Elizabeth Edwards notes, was fueled by notions of white

63 By far, Aunt Jemima Pancake Mix was not the only product to employ a black caricature as part of its advertising strategy. Others included Uncle Remus Maple Syrup, which pictured a black man standing next to the product tagline, “Dis sho am good,” Cream of Wheat advertisements that featured a smiling black man in a chef’s hat and holding a spatula, and the Gold Dust Twins Washing Powder advertisements that pictured two bald-headed black children with exaggerated, large lips happily standing at a wash tub, one child washing the dishes and the other drying them. Together, these images traffic in ideas of black people as categorically simple, ever-ready to serve and given to a natural cheerfulness. For more on these advertising strategies as well as the use of black caricatures in advertising globally, see Pieterse, White on Black and Kern-Foxworth, Aunt Jemima, Uncle Ben and Rastus.
65 Ibid.
supremacy that were rationalized through contemporaneous scientific developments.  

According to Edwards,

Underwriting this appropriation of most of the non-European globe and structuring responses to it was a set of assumptions concerning the superiority of the white man and the duties and rights this superiority bestowed. In parallel there developed an increasing dominance of ideas which placed value on technological and scientific achievement. In combination with a re-emergence of a more evangelical religious stance, this created a climate in which Europeans and those of European extraction in the New World could assert their assumed superiority and justify this political position scientifically.

The co-mingling, constitutive relationship between Western colonial expansion, ideas of white superiority and scientific development would be especially apparent through the emergence and formal institutionalization of anthropology, then considered a fact-gathering, classificatory natural science premised upon the idea that knowledge was constituted by a rational, observable “truth.” Like much of scientific thought throughout this period, the field was heavily informed by Darwin’s evolutionary theory, specifically its attention to tracking the development of human culture and civilization through categories such as “progression,” “regression,” “recapitulation,” and “archaic survival.”

Here, the idea of distinct, fixed races of people was fundamental to tracing such development: the spectrum of different races was understood to constitute the progression

66 Ibid.  
67 Ibid.  
68 Ibid. For more on the influence of Darwinian though on race science, see Roslyn Poignant, “Surveying the Field of View: The Making of the RAI Photographic Collection” in Elizabeth Edwards, ed. Anthropology and Photography.
of humankind, with each race representing a different stage in evolutionary development. Added to this, there was also considered to be an intrinsic relationship between a person’s physical nature and their moral and intellectual aptitude. Thus, culture was seen as biologically determined. It was in this sense that the anthropological method would prove to be a compatible bedfellow with European colonial aims to define distinct racial classifications and to further entrench cultural assumptions of white superiority. As Edwards delineates, anthropological thought dictated that “non-European races, who appeared less accomplished technologically, were interpreted as representing the ‘childhood of mankind,’ a phase through which European man had passed in his prehistoric and proto-historic periods in a linear progression toward civilization.”

The medium of photography, perceived during this period as a mechanism that revealed the “reality” of a given place or people, was central to the anthropological method, one premised upon observation, recording, measurement and classification into “racial types.” Regarded as the most important element in 19th century anthropological analysis, the racial type referred to the physical form or custom that distinguished a particular group from another. It subsumed individuality in favor of locating and establishing the general “essence” of a particular race of people. In this case, not only was culture viewed as biologically determined, but an individual “specimen” was representative of the whole. Through photography, this purported racial essence was

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71 Ibid, 240.
perceived as a physically observable reality that could be distilled, quantified, systematized and compared.\footnote{Among those principally concerned with the use of photographs in anthropological study was T.H. Huxley, president of the Ethnological Society in the mid-19\textsuperscript{th} century. In an effort to develop and systematize the most precise taxonomies of race, Huxley put forth detailed, uniform instructions for photographic image-making. Edwards notes that his system required unclothed subjects to be pictured full-length from both the front and profile. Pictured from the front, the right arm was outstretched horizontally, the palm of the hand towards the camera, ankles should be together as if standing at-attention. In profile view, the left side was to be turned to the camera and the left arm bent at the elbow in a way that did not obscure the dorsal area of the body; the back of the hand was to be turned towards the camera. In addition to full-length photographs, full face and profile photographs of the head were also recommended. According to Huxley’s instructions, photographic subjects should appear standing near a clearly marked measuring stick. For more on Huxley’s method, see Edwards, “Photographic ‘Types’: The Pursuit of Method.”}

In her analysis of the photographs contained in the archives of the Royal Anthropological Institute, Poignant delineates the particular ways in which photographs were arranged and labeled in the archive to facilitate distillation and systemization of racial typologies. For example, she notes that in a bound edition of his volume entitled \textit{Ethnological Photographic Gallery of the Various Races of Man}, German photographer Carl Dammann employed carte-de-visite—a type of small photograph created by a camera that could take up to twelve photographs of one person or of different people on the same negative—to encode a typology of race. The layout of an average of eight carte-de-visite a sheet in the volume allowed for the comparative systematizing Dammann aimed for. The images were presented in a way that marked what was considered the progression of human evolutionary development, beginning with the “Germanic and Teutonic type” and ending with the Australian Aborigines. The racial hierarchies implicit in such a layout was made even clearer in the captions that accompanied the photographs. The captions progressed from individual names and ranks of subjects pictured to denoting types, such as “Arab” or “Kaffir,” or tribal names. As Edwards notes in her analysis, such denotations reflect the ways in which non-Europeans were stripped of individual signifiers in order to highlight general cultural markers. Further, Poignant points out that the gradation in captions was paralleled with a similar line of descent in clothing: from dressed to undressed, manufactured clothing to natural native garb. For more on the Royal Anthropological Institute’s photographic archive, see Poignant, “Surveying the Field of View: The Making of the RAI Photographic Collection.”

Shawn Michelle Smith attends to the focus on white bodies in scientific photographs in the 19\textsuperscript{th} century, specifically in Eadweard Muybridge’s 1887 \textit{Animal Locomotive}. Muybridge included images of a naked white man’s body in action: walking, running, jumping, crawling. Unlike the images of black bodies in scientific photographs
technique employed by anthropologists and ethnographers that involved photographing an individual subject in “scientific isolation.” That is, anthropologists and ethnographers often photographed individuals up against a plain background that both suppressed context and also accentuated their physical attributes. In this way, the meaning and reality of the individual was left completely to the viewer. It was thus through photography, Edwards notes, that racial types were neutralized, objectified for anthropological use and, ultimately, employed to underwrite colonialism, racialized tropes, as well as hierarchical social structures and power relations.

Perhaps one of the more notable reference points for the ways in which photography was used to such ends is a collection of 15 daguerreotypes of enslaved black people commissioned by scientist Louis Agassiz in 1850. Noted as one of the most that held the black body up for study and scrutiny, Smith observes, the white body is studied for its actions. In his way, the white body is assumed. Smith writes that Muybridge’s work on human motion takes “the white body as neutral, examining its actions as normative.” See Shawn Michelle Smith, *Photography on the Color Line: W. E. B. DuBois, Race and Visual Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 49.

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74 Ibid. Edwards also highlights photographs in the anthropological archive that were taken by studio and commercial photographers during this period. While somewhat distinct from the conventions of ethnographic and anthropological photography, they reflect the ways in which scientific ideas concerning “racial types,” specifically the “primitive man,” merged with popular curiosity. These images of non-European were designed to capture the “typical native” through the photographer’s incorporation of cultural props (i.e., a basket or blanket), which may or not have belonged to the photographic subject, in an effort to emphasize their cultural “otherness” and, moreover, to establish the subject’s inferior social position in relation to the assumed viewer.
75 Ibid. See also Edwards, *Anthropology and Photography, 1860-1920*.
76 The images were discovered at the Harvard University’s Peabody Museum in 1975. Weems herself has made these images the focus of her work entitled, *From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried* (1996). The explores the exploitation of black bodies through the photographic medium. For more on the images, see Alan Trachtenberg,
famous scientists in America during the 19th century, Agassiz was a major proponent of the theory of polygenesis, the idea of separate creations for each race as distinct species. While the theory would become the hallmark of the American School of Ethnology, its development was particularly informed and governed by the political and aesthetic aims of southern scientists determined to prove the inferiority of enslaved African Americans in the decade before the Civil War. To gather evidence of polygenesis specifically in relation to Africans, Agassiz, at the suggestion of nationally recognized paleontologist Dr. Robert Gibbes, visited plantations around Columbia, SC in an effort to gain access to persons born on the African continent, those considered to be a “pure” form of the black race. While in Columbia, Agassiz examined and chose a select number of enslaved persons to be photographed by daguerreotypist Joseph T. Zealy. The images, used for his quantifying, classifying and ordering methods, would become the first known collection of ethnographic photographs of their kind in the United States.

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77 Brian Wallis, “Black Bodies, White Science: Louis Agassiz’s Slave Daguerreotypes,” *American Art* 9 (1995), 40, 42. Wallis notes that Agassiz was influenced by French zoologist Baron Georges Cuvier and specialized in classifying and ordering species of fish. He believed in the inferiority of black people.

78 Ibid, 44.

79 Ibid.

80 Ibid, 45. According to Wallis, how Agassiz came upon the idea to photograph the enslaved persons on the plantation is unknown. However, it is likely that he was familiar with and informed by similar photographic archives of human specimens published in European journals.
The collection includes images of seven enslaved persons who, once selected by Agassiz, were brought by Gibbes to a studio space where they were photographed by Zealy. Photographed up against a non-descript black background per the conventions of anthropometric photography, the enslaved persons are strikingly exposed. In all of the images they are either partially or completely nude. Once photographed, Gibbes recorded their names, African origins, and current ownership.\(^81\) The seven who were photographed were recorded as: Alfred, described as being of the Foulah tribe before he was enslaved to I. Lomas; Jem, of Gullah decadency and property of F.W. Green; Jack, who belonged to Guinea tribe and, at the time the image was taken, was a slave driver on the Edgehill Plantation of Benjamin Taylor; Drana, Jack’s American-born daughter and enslaved on the Taylor estate; Renty, of the Congo tribe, also enslaved on Taylor’s estate; Delia, Renty’s American-born daughter and enslaved on Taylor’s estate; and, finally, Fassena, who was of the Mandingo tribe and worked as a carpenter on the plantation of Wade Hampton.\(^82\)

In his attention to the images commissioned by Agassiz, curator Brian Wallis notes that the images are divided into two series, each reflecting a particular scientific approach. The first series, consisting of images of Alfred and Jem standing, fully nude, and showing front, side and rear views, was indicative of a physiognomic approach, one that emphasized recording body shape, proportions and posture.\(^83\) The second series of

\(^{81}\) Ibid.
\(^{82}\) Ibid, 45-46.
\(^{83}\) Ibid, 46.
images were tightly focused on the heads and naked torsos of Jack, Renty, Delia and Fassena. These were in line with the phrenological approach, which emphasized the character and shape of the head. For Aggasiz, the series of images allowed him to apply his preferred method of comparison and classification. That is, he emphasized the need for a cumulative analysis that could be garnered from a series of properly ordered images over against individual images and specimens. Moreover, the images were reflective of typological photographs, such that they facilitated observation and measurement of the human form, particularly skeletons and skulls. This photographic approach allowed for an analysis of the human body in an attempt to understand and make connections between different human groups and to draw conclusions about mental and physical aptitude.

In line with polygenetic concerns for defining and ordering separate racial types, the bodily measurements and assessments applied to Agassiz’s commissioned images of enslaved people in Columbia were undoubtedly employed to establish a “negro type.” Importantly, the construction of racial types required the existence of a standard type. Wallis posits that while scientists argued that their work was without prejudice, anthropological classificatory systems consistently reflected the ancient Greeks as the aesthetic standard-bearer against which all other racial types were defined and

84 Ibid.
85 Ibid, 41.
86 Ibid, 49.
87 Ibid.
88 Ibid, 52.
measured.\textsuperscript{89} That is, the phrenological charts of skull measurements purportedly based on the images included a progressive ranking from the primate head to the African to the classical Greek ideal.\textsuperscript{90} From these charts emerged a negro type in ethnographic illustrations that was situated in clear distinction from the white ideal through its emphasis on highly distorted representations of black bodies. In particular, skulls of black people were depicted with an abnormally pronounced brow, protruding lips and teeth and a back-sloping forehead.\textsuperscript{91}

Yet, in addition to using photographic images to conduct physical measurements in order to aesthetically assess and distort certain anatomical characteristics attributed to a particular race of people, the images and physical measurements were also used to assess the moral character, manner and social habits of each racial type. The displays of nudity and the somewhat eroticized nature of the Agassiz images—the full nudity photographs that center and emphasize the genitals and the naked torso images where just enough clothing is left to appear in the bottom of the frame so as to look as though it has been stripped off of the wearer—are, to be sure, reflective of the voyeuristic interests and perhaps even, as Cedric Robinson puts it, “kinky ambitions” of Agassiz himself.\textsuperscript{92}

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\textsuperscript{89} Ibid.  \\
\textsuperscript{90} Ibid.  \\
\textsuperscript{91} Ibid.  \\
\textsuperscript{92} Wallis, 54. Wallis attributes an “unwavering voyeurism” to the ways in which scientists such as Agassiz indiscriminately surveyed the bodies of African photographic subjects. He goes on to argue that the images intersect with the contemporaneous development of pornography, another form of photography that concerned with “the tactile surface of the human body.” For Wallis, the Agassiz images along with those of Sarah Baartman reflect the collapse of scientific investigation of the racial other into the realm of the pornographic. See also, Cedric Robinson briefly analyzes the Agassiz
\end{flushright}
Evident in his own writings is an expressed interest in what he considered to be a type of sexual proclivity and looseness given to black people, particularly black women. For instance, in an 1863 letter, Agassiz attributed the existence of mixed-race people in America to the ways in which mixed race and black women sexually entrap young southern white men:

> As soon as the sexual desires are awakening in the young men of the South, they find it easy to gratify themselves by the readiness with which they are met by colored [halfbreed] house servants…This blunts his better instincts in that direction and leads him gradually to seek more spicy partners, as I have heard the full blacks called by fast young men.  

Although written some years after Agassiz had the images commissioned by Zealy, this portion of Agassiz’s letter is somewhat revelatory in that it speaks to how the polygenist understood and conceived of the bodies of those pictured as given to sexual vulgarity and seduction, thus providing further context for the subtle sense of erotic voyeurism that attends the images.

Agassiz’s image displays are also strikingly reminiscent of the images and displays of Sarah Baartman, a Khoikhoi woman popularly known as the “Hottentot

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93 Louis Agassiz to S.G. Howe, a member of President Abraham Lincoln’s Inquiry Commission, August 9, 1863. According to historian of science Stephen Gould, the letter was one of four long letters Agassiz wrote at the request of Howe concerning his opinion about the role of black people in the newly reunited nation just after the Civil War. Original letter in Harvard University’s Houghton Library, Cambridge. Quoted in Stephen Jay Gould, The Measure of a Man (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1996), 81.
Venus,” coordinated by French zoologist Baron Cuvier, a mentor to Agassiz.\textsuperscript{94} Baartman was famously paraded throughout Europe where her buttocks and other parts of her genitals could be examined and scrutinized by scientists and the general public alike.\textsuperscript{95} In their attention to the specific ways in which black women were photographed for scientific and colonialist aims during the 19\textsuperscript{th} century, art historians Carla Williams and Deborah Willis point out the more insidiously technical aspects of image-making that encoded photographs with assumptions about the moral character and habits of black photographic subjects.\textsuperscript{96} According to Williams and Willis, images of black women in ethnographic photographs were employed as an iconographic device to signify the opposite, or objectified and debased negation of European white women.\textsuperscript{97} For instance, the images of French artist Earnest Benecke, who photographed women throughout Syria and Egypt, reflect this kind of character construction.\textsuperscript{98} The women pictured in his images take on what appears to be a stock pose: with one arm raised, they draw the viewer’s attention directly to the breast line.\textsuperscript{99} For Willis and Williams, the repetition of the awkward, unnatural gesture in most of Benecke’s images conveys the constructed nature of the photographs that suggests sexual availability. What’s more, Benecke’s images, they argue, reflect the European male’s understanding of his own relationship to

\textsuperscript{94} Wallis, 54.
\textsuperscript{95} Ibid. After Baartman’s death, Cuvier dissected her body and published a text about her features where he likened parts of her anatomy to that of an orangutan.
\textsuperscript{96} Deborah Willis and Carla Williams, \textit{The Black Female Body: A Photographic History} (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002), 12.
\textsuperscript{97} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{98} Ibid, 15.
\textsuperscript{99} Ibid.
the women in the images.\textsuperscript{100} That is, the photographs simulate an experience of possession while keeping the actual women at a safe and measurable distance.\textsuperscript{101}

As the categories of race, racism, and the hierarchical social order that attended them emerged as naturalized beliefs and practices throughout the 19\textsuperscript{th} century, they required both scientific and cultural thought for their full and thorough solidification. The Agassiz daguerreotypes and other anthropometric images during the period, as Wallis notes, reflect the ways in which photography constituted a significant meeting ground in which both scientific thought and cultural ideas infused to produce and reinforce the logics of racial classification and racist ideology.\textsuperscript{102} It was in and up against this context of scientific photography and the popular images they inspired that historians delineate a history of black photography wherein black representation and public image are always already at stake.

\section*{2.3. Black Photographs in Opposition}

The discourse concerning the history of black photography charts the ways in which the origins of black photography were deeply intertwined and lodged within the

\textsuperscript{100} Ibid, 16.
\textsuperscript{101} Ibid. Popular and more recent publications such as National Geographic have only recently started acknowledged their role in promulgating racist images under the guise of scientific study. See Susan Goldberg, “For Decades, Our Coverage Was Racist. To Rise Above Our Past, We Must Acknowledge It,” \textit{National Geographic} April 2018 \url{https://www.nationalgeographic.com/magazine/2018/04/from-the-editor-race-racism-history/}. Accessed June 2018.
\textsuperscript{102} Wallis, 57.
struggle for freedom and liberation at the turn of the century and into the 20th century. For bell hooks, these historical origins are foundational to her conception of an oppositional black aesthetic. In proffering this aesthetic, she draws from the work of historian Roger Wilkins and his contention that the power of perception—that is, the power to define the reality of black life and manage how it is viewed in ways that reinforce such definitions—was not only central to enforcing Jim Crow segregation, but it also secured the persistence of white supremacy and its systems of inequity long after segregation was outlawed. The struggle for freedom, then, was fundamentally a struggle against the ongoing precarity of black representation, it was a struggle to redefine and reclaim how black life was viewed and recognized. It is in the context of this struggle, hooks argues, that black photography was both a pleasurable practice of containing memories and keeping history as well as an oppositional “site of resistance” wherein the camera was employed to disprove degrading white representations of black people through the creation of true-to-life images. Although other historians of black photography do not use the language of “oppositional black aesthetic,” the notion that black images function as an oppositional challenge or contestation of stereotypical, white racist depictions of black life significantly informs and is woven to varying degrees in and through the scholarship on black photography. This primarily occurs through the delineations of the ways in which certain black influential figures, academics, and black photographers used black images to not only lay claim to a particular identity—one largely constituted by a

104 hooks, 48-49.
sense of dignity, self-possession, uplift and often of class refinement and respectability—but an identity that stood in categorical opposition to the degraded ascriptions and identities imposed upon black life. In the historiography that follows, I delineate the ways in which an aesthetic of opposition informs how black photographs are read and interpreted. In providing this historiography, I seek to situate and distinguish the aesthetic interests of an appositional black aesthetic and what it adds to the discourse concerning black photography.

In their seminal study of black photography in the 19th and early 20th centuries, Maurice Wallace and Shawn Michelle Smith note that the commercialization of the daguerreotype in 1839 as well as the even more popular carte-de-viste in 1861 made visual representation widely available to those previously unable to engage with the more bourgeois visual forms of painting and sculpture. To be sure, the advent of photography held great democratizing promise across the United States in that it gave Americans unprecedented opportunity for self-representation. Yet, for black people, the

105 Maurice O. Wallace and Shawn Michelle Smith, ed. Pictures and Progress: Early Photography and the Making of African American Identity (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), 3. Wallace and Smith contend that the literature on race and the development of photography tends to focus more heavily on how the photographic medium was used to stigmatize African American life. This, they argue, has produced a void in the archive, such that we know more about dehumanizing scientific daguerreotypes and other forms of racist imagery than we know about what African Americans did with photography when it was in their own hands. This works follows in the tradition Deborah Willis’s path-breaking scholarship on the role of black photography and photographers in black life. See Willis, Reflections in Black. See also Picturing Us. In particular, Pictures and Progress contributes to filling the void in the archive delineating how African American orators, authors, intellectuals and activists—including Frederick Douglass, Sojourner Truth, W. E. B. DuBois and Ida B. Wells—engaged in “photography as practice” in efforts toward black progress.
significance of the advent of photography was even greater: not only did it offer an accessible means of self-representation, but the medium was also a political tool in which to lay claim to new legal, political and socially recognized identities in the Civil War and post-Emancipation eras. Wallace and Smith argue that as they sought to define and negotiate the meaning of freedom, black people made photographs a key site through which to do it.

For orator and abolitionist Frederick Douglass, the new visual medium was paramount to social progress. A frequent sitter for portraits, Douglass made a number of lectures on the promise of photography. While Douglass held an optimistic view of photography, the struggle for black representation and the ways in which the medium had been employed, specifically by the American School of Ethnology, to advance scientific racism, were critical to his analysis of the medium. For Douglass, white artists and

106 Ibid.
107 Ibid, 7. According to Wallace and Smith, these lectures, entitled, “The Age of Pictures,” “Lectures on Pictures,” “Pictures and Progress” and “Life Pictures,” all promoted photography’s epistemological and social potential. In her study of Douglass’s 1861 lecture “Pictures and Progress” and his later revision of that same lecture in 1865, Laura Wexler contends that in both lectures, Douglass was in conversation with Abraham Lincoln concerning the image of black men and the image of the American Union. In the first lecture, Douglass responds to Lincoln’s hesitation to arm black troops who were fighting in the Civil War by arguing for photography’s capacity to humanize enslaved black people in ways that enable them to be more widely seen as suitable recruits. In his later revision of the same essay, Douglass promotes the successful end of the Civil War and the potential of photography as a tool for disseminating a prophetic image of the nation as the “more perfect Union.” See Laura Wexler, “‘A More Perfect Likeness’: Frederick Douglass and the Image of the Nation” in Maurice Wallace and Shawn Michelle Smith, eds. Pictures and Progress, 19.
108 Ibid. In terms of his “optimistic view” of the medium, Douglas contended that the “picture-making faculty” was fundamental to what it means to be human; the ability to use the visual technology and appreciate the pictures it produced is what distinguishes
photographers could not be trusted with images of black life. Taking aim at how black people were depicted by white illustrators in ways that distorted their bodies and promulgated ideas of black ignorance and degradation, he asserted in his newspaper, *North Star*, “Negroes can never have impartial portraits at the hands of white artists. It seems to us next to impossible for white people to take likenesses of black men, without most grossly exaggerating their distinctive features.”

The camera lens, however—specifically in the hands of black people—could be used to challenge and disrupt racist representation and claim a new identity as freepersons.

In her study of a particular series of Douglass’s photographic portraits, Laura Wexler argues that the images reflect the potential he saw in photography to recast the public image of the enslaved and disenfranchised, to project a positive image of black freedom that proved that African American dignity and consciousness existed all along.

The series of images, chosen by Wexler for their striking similarity, each capture Douglass sitting for a portrait at a different age over the course of his life.

Humans from animals. Further, he argued, as photography defined what it means to be human, it also served as a catalyst for social change in that it enabled criticism. That is, it enables us to hold ourselves up for observation and to engage in self-critique and improvement.

Some of the images contained in the particular set of images that Wexler discusses can be found online in Michael Zhang, “Frederick Douglass was the Most Photographed Man of the 19th Century,” *PitaPixel* (November 2015). Assessed August 16, 2018. [https://petapixel.com/2015/11/02/frederick-douglass-was-the-most-photographed-american-of-the-19th-century/](https://petapixel.com/2015/11/02/frederick-douglass-was-the-most-photographed-american-of-the-19th-century/)

Ibid. According to Wexler, in the first image in the series, likely taken around 1840, Douglass is a young man in his twenties just beginning to gain notoriety as an abolitionist. The final image is taken near the end of his life in 1895; his face reflects both
Strikingly, as Wexler points out, Douglass carefully maintains the same three-quarter bust pose in each of the images. He consistently sits at a slanted angle with a singular gaze directed toward the right. While there are of course some negligible distinctions between the images, they maintain a managed uniformity over decades, signaling for Wexler the intentional decisions that Douglass repeatedly made about his own self-representation in an effort to interject himself into the canon of “illustrious Americans.”

In oppositional contradistinction to the pseudoscientific anthropometric images that imposed abjection and social death on the enslaved, Wexler posits, Douglass’s portraits signify a claim to an upstanding, representative life of distinction by a man who had formerly been denied it.

Douglass was not the only 19th century black public figure to extol the value of photography and to strategically employ it toward representational aims. As Augusta Rohrbach argues, during this same time period abolitionist and activist Sojourner Truth masterfully used photography in ways that would iconize her own public image by not only frequently sitting for portraits, but also by orchestrating their wide circulation during and after the Civil War.

the wear of Douglass’s age and a kind of resolute conviction. The images in between show evidence of a maturation from young man to elder statesman.

Ibid, 36-37.

Ibid, 33.

Augusta Rohrbach, “Shadow and Substance: Sojourner Truth in Black and White” in Maurice Wallace and Shawn Michelle Smith, eds. Pictures and Progress, 83. In addition to her own 1850 and 1875 publications of Narrative of Sojourner Truth, publications about Truth by Frances Dana Gage and Harriet Beecher Stowe also contributed to the popularity and pervasiveness of her image in 19th century American public life. Though
Truth posed over a dozen times for portraits, mostly during the years of the Civil War when she was in her late 60s and also in the years immediately prior to her death in 1883. Among the portraits that Truth arranged and sat for, her portraits taken in 1864 in Detroit were ones that she reproduced throughout her life and were perhaps favorites among all of her images. In the images, Truth is seated in a relatively spare context; the images do not include interior or landscape. For historian Nell Painter points out, the props included in the image, which include a book and a vase of flowers that lie on a table, and utensils for knitting in Truth’s arms, work together with Truth’s expertly tailored clothing that reflects a traditional Quaker style of dress, suggest a sense of feminine gentility, leisure and respectability.

Painter notes further that, in line with the Truth would largely stand by the images of herself promulgated by others in these publications, according to historian Darcy Grimaldo Grigsby she took exception to Stowe’s characterization of her in an 1863 Atlantic Monthly essay entitled, “The Libyan Sibyl.” In it, Stowe recounts an encounter she had with Truth. Strikingly, Grigsby notes, the image of Truth in the essay is one that resembles a caricature and minstrel figure; Stowe stressed Truth’s purported African origins and gave her an exaggerated southern dialect that signaled black naiveté and inferiority. Within three months of the publication, Truth published a refutation of the characterization in a Boston newspaper wherein she implored the editor to look not only to her narrative, but to her photographic images. For Truth, her portraits, just as much as her book, provided a critical corrective to Stowe’s misrepresentation. See Darcy Grimaldo Grigsby, Enduring Truths: Sojourner’s Shadows and Substance (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2015), 40-45. See also Nell Irvin Painter, “Representing Truth: Sojourner Truth’s Knowing and Becoming Known,” The Journal of American History 81 (1994), 476.

115 Ibid, 10. The photographs were made in two formats—both inexpensive, mass produced and thus easy to circulate: carte de visite and the cabinet card.
117 Painter, 483.
118 Ibid.
genre of celebrity portraiture, Truth’s gaze is past the camera, giving her sense of depth and seriousness. In her attention to the same image, art historian Darcy Grigsby finds aesthetic significance in the spare setting: it works to clearly foreground Truth in the portrait. According to Grigsby, this affect is even further compounded with Truth’s calm composure, which stands in stark contrast to earlier images in which her facial expression is one of tension and suspicion, to produce a palpable sense of self-possession in the portrait. Truth is a woman who stands fully on her own, answering only to herself. But while Painter reads Truth’s knitting in the image as a signifier of middle-class matronly leisure, Grigsby posits otherwise: although Truth indeed sought to look respectable and middle class, with her knitting in hand she was determined to look not so much leisurely, but skilled and hardworking. In the post-Emancipation context, knitting for the newly emancipated represented the acquisition of useful skills. According to Grigsby, by incorporating knitting into her portrait, Truth was redefining and pushing back against notions of black labor as menial and unskilled with a visual representation of black labor as involving expertise and industriousness.

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119 Ibid.
120 Ibid, 76.
121 Ibid, 80.
122 Ibid, 81. According to Grigsby, Truth was known to informally introduce the craft to enslaved persons by practicing it as she spoke to them in an effort to convey that they could “be something” through industry and skill.
123 Ibid. To support herself, Truth advertised the sale of copies of her portraits and the Narrative in newspapers. She also sold them wherever she did public speeches. Each of the sold portraits included a caption along the bottom of the image: “I Sell the Shadow to Support the Substance. Sojourner Truth.” For Grigsby, the structure and word choice of the caption could not be more significant. Truth’s use of the first person positions her as the author, the person who speaks. Moreover, Grigsby argues, as first person is most
Made a decade after the Agassiz images, Truth’s portraits are read as standing in stark opposition to the objectifying anthropometric photographs that reduced black life to subservience and docility. For Painter, there is “nothing of the piteous slave mother, chest-bearing insolent, grinning minstrel, or amusing naif” in Truth’s images.124 In addition to Truth’s own forward-thinking ingenuity in authoring her public self, Grigsby and Painter argue, the images enact a significant social function at the end of the 19th century: they projected a model of civilized comportment worthy of emulation for the newly emancipated and importantly, the possibility of a prosperous African American future.125

The Civil War and post-Emancipation eras in which Douglass and Truth commissioned their images is undoubtedly critical to reading and analyzing their portraits. To interpret the images through an appositional aesthetic is not to sidestep the ways in which they were employed to stand in stark contrast to scientific and popular images that promulgated ideas of black degradation and inferiority during the period.

often used when a person is particularly aware of their relative weakness, their subordinate position to more powerful others, Truth’s use of first person establishes her, a former enslaved person, as one with a subject position in a social context that conceived of her as a propertied object. Grigsby points out that Truth’s claim to personhood, authorship and self-ownership through her portrait did not stop at her caption and the image itself. She would also copyright the images in her own name rather than follow the conventions of photography that dictated that photographs be copyrighted in the name of the photographer. In this way, Grigsby argues, Truth’s carte to visite enacted a claim to self and agency from multiple position points: her self-chosen name as “Sojourner Truth,” the caption’s inscription that identified Truth as the actor, and her name yet again on the back of the card in the copyright inscription that signaled her actions in the past when she entered her name in the Clerk’s office as owner of the image.

124 Painter, 486.
125 Ibid. Grigsby, 79.
Moreover, as historians have noted, Douglass’s and Truth’s written accounts in their speeches and letters attest to the oppositional, corrective function through which they understood black images and aimed to use their own portraits to claim new legal and political identities. An appositional black aesthetic holds this contextual history constant while also inquiring into what these images could potentially tell us about who Douglass and Truth were beyond their public projections. For instance, is there something to be gleaned about who Douglass was from his particular and consistent choices around style of dress in his series of images beyond his public pronunciations concerning upstanding comportment? An appositional black aesthetic does not seek to bracket or necessarily disavow the oppositional work of black images. Rather, it seeks to add to an understanding concerning “the work” of black images by interrogating what black photographs can tell us about the rich interiority of black life.

In her extensive work on W. E. B. DuBois’s contribution to the American Negro Exhibition at the 1900 Paris Exposition, scholar of visual studies Shawn Michelle Smith discusses how the intellectual used the visual medium to similar ends as Truth and Douglass, but through a procured collection of black portraits, landscapes and cityscapes. DuBois’s 363 images were organized into albums entitled *Types of American Negroes*, *Georgia, U.S.A.* and *Negro Life in Georgia, U.S.A.*126 The albums are comprised mostly

126 Shawn Michelle Smith, *Photography on the Color Line: W. E. B. DuBois, Race and Visual Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 3. According to Smith, DuBois’s participation Paris Exposition was a decisive moment in his early intellectual life. It was from there that he would gain national and international recognition as a leader in the field of sociology. Importantly, DuBois introduced the exhibit with what would become one of his most prolific statements: “The problem of the twentieth century is the problem
of portraits taken of students from Atlanta University, where DuBois was a professor at
the time. In a way that suggests an oppositional aesthetic at work in the images, Smith
argues that DuBois’s collection constitutes a counterarchive of visual images that
contested the long legacy of racial hierarchies and racist taxonomies established by race
science and anthropometric photography, such as the Agassiz images discussed above.

According to Smith, DuBois’s images must be read through the particular kind of cultural
work they performed in the context of the scientific racism, racial segregation and
lynching that dominated turn of the century American social life. In this context, they

of the color-line.” For Smith, the inclusion of this statement in the context of a
photographic exhibition suggests that there is a distinctly visual meaning at work in
DuBois’s original understanding of the “color-line” that has been overlooked and thus
warrants exploration. In this vein, she posits, the notion of the color line is not only a
marker of social and economic divides that result from slavery, segregation and
colonialism, it is also “a nexus of competing gazes in which racialization is understood as
the effect of both intense scrutiny and obfuscation under a white supremacist gaze.”

DuBois’s contribution to the American Negro Exhibit at the Paris Exposition also
included a study of Atlanta University that consisted of thirty-one charts designed to
illustrate educational advancement among black people in Georgia. The photographs
included in the Paris Exposition, according to Smith, were part of DuBois’s larger
Georgia Negro Exhibit, which he organized and produced at Atlanta University in
collaboration with students and recent graduates. The Georgia exhibit was modeled after
DuBois’s work in The Philadelphia Negro, such that it included a series of charts and
graphs that documented the social and economic status of African Americans, maps that
depicted the African American population of a number of Georgia counties, as well as
a multivolume set that contained all of the Georgia state laws that pertained to African
Americans from 1732-1899.

Ibid, 4. The remaining photographs depicted domestic interiors, homes, businesses,
churches, rural areas, street scenes and group portraits.

Ibid, 2. See also Shawn Michelle Smith, “Looking at One’s Self through the Eyes of
Others”: W. E. B. DuBois’s Photographs for the Paris Exposition of 1900” in Maurice O.
Wallace and Shawn Michelle Smith, Pictures and Progress.

Ibid, 9. Here, Smith draws from Allan Sekula and his argument that every photograph
enters an existing visual terrain that has been mapped and codified by other photographs,
most often in the service of competing claims and discourses. That is, the meaning of a
photograph is deciphered by posit it up against other oppositional, yet mutually
existed in critical relation to and signified on the scientific, eugenicist, and criminological photographic archives that were employed as proof of black inferiority.130

In delineating DuBois’s albums as counterarchive, Smith argues that the portraits contained in the collection replicate the photographic method used by scientists and eugenicists in an effort to undermine the assumed transparency and authority of institutional archives and their attendant modes of racialized photographic meaning. The portraits offer two views of each individual pictured, one frontal image and another in a varying degrees of profile pose.131 The double poses that encourage scrutiny of the head and face, along with the pairing of the images, and the repetition of the pairings with each sitter that facilitates comparison between subjects hearkens to anthropological photographic studies said to evidence distinct racial “types.”132

Smith points out that while DuBois’s portraits at first glance invoke the scientific images that were designed to register black inferiority, these images level an oppositional contestation of race science. That is, while anthropometric images were used to establish reinforcing photographs; the middle-class portrait, for instance gains its meaning through the criminal mugshot. See Allan Sekula, “The Body and the Archive.”

130 Ibid.
131 Ibid, 44.
132 Ibid. Smith sees specific correlations and resonances between DuBois’s images and those of Francis Galton, the founder of eugenics, in his 1884 publication of The Life History Album. A self-identified white supremacist, Galton contended that there existed nine distinct racial biological types that could be identified by their different physical, moral and intellectual characteristics. Anglo-Saxons, he argued, were situated atop a modern racial pinnacle that black people could never reach. DuBois’s albums replicate Galton’s photographic method not only in the paired frontal and profile headshots, but also in the oval framing of the portraits.
the physical coherence of racial types, the DuBois portraits exploded the very notion. The “Negro type” as represented in the exhibition was not constituted by a singular type depiction, but a multiple array of types. According to Smith, the ways in which blond and pale black people were placed next to brunette and darker toned black people in the albums directly challenged the idea of color as a marker of racial difference and the body as a sign of racial meaning. In this way, DuBois’s portraits unfix the idea of a strict negro type. Moreover, Smith posits, the inclusion of portraits of biracial students and white-looking African Americans not only flew in the face of white supremacist conceptions of racial taxonomies, it also challenged their deep investments in socially separating the races by signaling a history of physical and sexual union between them.

Smith points out that in a few of the images, some of the students are pictured laughing hysterically, presumably, she writes, in response to DuBois as he oversaw the portraits. Here again, without disputing the oppositional nature of DuBois’s subversive riff on anthropomorphic photography and the criminalized mugshot, an appositional black aesthetic engagement with this series of images would hone in on the images in which students are caught in laughter. What might this brief, but noteworthy slippage in the customary seriousness of the images suggest about the nature of DuBois’s professorial relationship to his students? Could these instances of jovial light-heartedness presumably shared between DuBois and his students caught by the camera say something

133 Ibid, 61.
134 Ibid, 63.
135 Ibid, 60.
about the type of engaging, perhaps even personable educational community the renowned intellectual created at Atlanta University at the turn of the century?

DuBois’s exhibition also included more traditional single portraits in full, rectangular frames.\textsuperscript{136} In these images, the camera was placed at a greater distance in order to show the body and accessories worn by the sitter, including large feather hats, formal suits and Victorian dresses, as well as the surrounding areas and fixtures of the room, such as ornate chairs, lace curtains, books and statuettes.\textsuperscript{137} Smith contends that such a progression of portraits, from the riffs on the criminal mugshots and scientific photographs to the more traditionally refined portraiture, suggests that DuBois was attempting to convey that if there is a negro type, it is constituted by middle-class gentleman and ladies.\textsuperscript{138} The images of the men included among these portraits are ones in which they are dressed in three-piece suits, crisp white shirts with stiff collars and neckties.\textsuperscript{139} Their bodies are cropped below the chest, allowing a close view of the face. Smith points out that sometimes the men look directly into the camera, but most often just to the side center in a way that reflects a lofty gaze of contemplation and interiority.\textsuperscript{140} The images of women are taken at an even greater distance to include more of the body, including arms and hands, as well as the studio surroundings. Many of these images prominently display the wedding rings worn by the women.\textsuperscript{141} Here, Smith notes

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{136} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{137} Ibid, 65.
\item \textsuperscript{138} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{139} Ibid, 67.
\item \textsuperscript{140} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{141} Ibid.
\end{itemize}
the gender dynamics at work in the images. While the images of men do not include their hands, the consistent inclusion of wedding rings on the hands of women in the images signify respectability and domesticity.\textsuperscript{142}

These dynamics are reflective of the ways in which a patriarchal model of the black elite was foundational to DuBois’s challenge to racist claims concerning black life. That is, according to Smith, DuBois’s images are indicative of his vision of restrained, disciplined manhood that stood in stark contrast to images of the sexualized criminality purported to be endemic to black men and that were used to justify lynching. For DuBois, securing this vision of patriarchy was largely dependent on policing and condemning the sexuality of black women.\textsuperscript{143} In *The Philadelphia Negro* and *The Negro American Family*, he argued that the respectability of a family was measured by the extent to which a black patriarch kept his wife at home, devoted to motherhood and middle class housewifery; such roles worked as a civilizing force against the sexual excesses that, according to DuBois, befell poorly trained young women and the black working class. These ideas would inform his choices about the images of black women, men and families to include in his albums.\textsuperscript{144} The portraits he ultimately chose to display in the American Negro Exhibit at the Paris Exposition would prove to be critical examples of the type of black art he would call for some 20 years later in an essay entitled, “Criteria for Negro Art.”\textsuperscript{145} According to Smith, his carefully curated albums that were on display

\textsuperscript{142} Ibid, 69.
\textsuperscript{143} Ibid, 83.
\textsuperscript{144} Ibid, 101.
\textsuperscript{145} Ibid, 43.
in the Paris Exposition epitomized what DuBois identified in the essay as the political potential of black art: the albums uncovered “the human face of blackness,” thus posing a challenge to the long legacy of racist imagery that rendered black life deformed and depraved.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴⁶ Ibid. This question concerning the extent to which black art and photography should be employed to critically reclaim and recast the black public image would inform much of black art and image-making at the turn of the 20th century. DuBois’s “Criteria for Negro Art” was itself a particular argument offered within the context of an ongoing debate about the nature and role of black art, specifically the then-expanding field of black literature. Working from the premise that “all art is propaganda,” DuBois articulated a conception of black art that had high historical, social and political stakes: “suppose the only Negro who survived some centuries hence was the Negro painted by white Americans in the novels and essays they have written. What would people in a hundred years say of black Americans?” For DuBois, black people must ensure that the propagandist of white supremacy were not the sole creators and proprietors of black imagery. Through attention to beauty and what DuBois describes as its attendant notions of truth and goodness, black artists had a duty to advance images of blackness that posited us as “human, lovable, and inspired with new ideals for the world.” DuBois’s interlocutors, however, including Alain Locke, maintained an alternative perspective concerning the obligations of black art. Two years after the publication of DuBois’s “Criteria,” Locke published his own missive, one in which he argued against the notion of art as propaganda. In “Art or Propaganda?,” he argued that black art created for the purpose of propaganda was contrived and monotonous, such that it sprang out of one-sided partisanship and predeterminations. Moreover, this type of black art perpetuated the very idea of “group inferiority” that it endeavored to challenge in that it maintained a preoccupation with the whims of the dominant majority.¹⁴⁶ Nevertheless, Locke argued, he was not after a conception of art premised upon “art for art’s sake.” Rather, he promoted black artistic expression that was grounded in “a deep realization of the fundamental purpose of art and of its function as a tap root of vigorous, flourishing living.” That is, Locke promoted an idea of art as self-contained, free, pure, and that allowed for unmitigated self-expression. While he was not against art that reflected group expression, he favored artistic approaches that allowed artists to engage in group expression that did not foreclose individual expression. To be sure, DuBois and Locke maintained considerable disagreement concerning the role and function of black art. Nevertheless, despite their intellectual differences, both thinkers maintained a shared concern with challenging the notion of black inferiority and fostering racial pride. The concern was indicative of the larger black artistic and intellectual tenor of the early 20th century time period from which emerged the New Negro Movement. See W. E. B.
According to Smith, the intentional choices DuBois made concerning the portraits to include in the exhibition also applied to the photographs of landscapes and cityscapes he included in the exhibition. However, although the landscape images reflected urban and rural poverty, noticeably absent from these images are the people who experienced impoverishment. These images, Smith posits, were crafted to represent the environmental forces against which many black people sought to build their lives. Yet, for DuBois, to include black individuals in the images would be to risk enabling white viewers to read the environment as a “natural outgrowth” of black life. An appositional black aesthetic approach would take interests in these landscape images, but for a slightly different reason than DuBois intended. Instead of sole emphasis on the environmental forces that caused the impoverishment of black communities, appositional black aesthetics would interrogate the extent to which traces of the forms of community and relationality black people managed to create in, through and despite such forces can be found in the landscapes. What do these landscapes say about the inner communal lives of impoverished and low-wage black communities?

In her assessment of the development of black photography during the New Negro Movement, Deborah Willis notes that the growing access to cameras and photography for black photographers became critical to disproving characteristically

crude and demoralizing representations of black people in racist postcards and advertisements and laying claim to black dignity and self-determination.\textsuperscript{147} Willis notes that between 1900 and 1940, black photographers developed studio businesses that flourished in larger cities. The low cost of photography made portraiture available to a wider public; black southern migrants, working class laborers and domestic workers, artists and educators alike all took advantage of the technology. Noted photographers during the period, such as Prentice Herman “P. H.” Polk and James VanDerZee took portraits that represented the ideals and dreams of the black working class by giving their images a stylish, cosmopolitan quality.\textsuperscript{148} VanDerZee in particular employed the conventions of 19\textsuperscript{th} century studio photography to envision black middle-class life.\textsuperscript{149} According to Willis, his formal and carefully composed images depict subjects that appear heroic and self-aware.\textsuperscript{150} Many are pictured with props, such as simulated fireplaces, cardboard dogs, and painted backdrops, that reflect the roots of VanDerZee’s

\textsuperscript{147} Deborah Willis, “Picturing the New Negro Woman” in Barbara Thompson, ed. \textit{Black Womanhood: Images, Icons and Ideologies of the African Body} (Hanover, NH: Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth College, 2008), 228. According to Willis, the term “New Negro” represented an emphasis and spirit of self-awareness, artistic consciousness, and racial pride in black communities after 1900. These ideas were reflected in art, print, artifacts, photography and film. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. situates the New Negro Movement as part and parcel of early 20\textsuperscript{th} century black migration out of the rural south and agricultural economies to industrial, urban metropoles. In this context, he writes, African Americans engaged in a type of cultural reinvention through the exchange of traditional southern and northern black cultures and through a synthesis of the two. See Henry Louis Gates, Jr., “New Negroes and, Migration and Cultural Exchange,” in Elizabeth Hutton Turner, ed. \textit{Jacob Lawrence: The Migration Series} (Washington, D.C.: The Rappahannock Press in association with the Philips Collection, 1993).

\textsuperscript{148} Willis, \textit{Reflections in Black}, 38.
\textsuperscript{149} Ibid, 43.
\textsuperscript{150} Ibid.
work in the amplified sentimentality of Pictorialism.\textsuperscript{151} For Willis, the famed photographer’s images provide an elegant, optimistic view of African American life that constitutes a revisionist response to the prevailing racist imagery of the day.\textsuperscript{152}

Willis notes that the archives suggest that black women at the turn of the century were intentional about how they were portrayed. They used the camera to project a “New Negro Woman” image that emphasized racial uplift and improving black representation through representations of themselves as beautiful, educated, religious and exploring their dreams.\textsuperscript{153} These images would stand in contradistinction with what Willis, drawing from the analysis of scholar of gender, black women and beauty Maxine Leeds Craig, identifies as the two prevailing stock images of black women during the period: “the hypersexual black woman and the asexual black women workhorse.”\textsuperscript{154}

Businesswoman Maggie Mitchell, also known as Lena Walker, was a frequent sitter for portraits and constructed her images in ways that reflected her professional and sophisticated way of life. Willis notes that in her portraits, she wore her hair with a strict part down the middle; she stood erect and stiff among various stock props associated with a traditional Victorian photographic studio. The images signified her personal wealth and

\textsuperscript{151} Ibid, 42.
\textsuperscript{152} Ibid, 43.
\textsuperscript{153} Willis, “Picturing the New Negro Woman,” 233. Willis notes that one of the first to articulate and conceive the notion of “New Negro Womanhood” was educator and activist Fannie Barrier Williams. Along with Booker T. Washington and N.B. Wood, she edited a volume entitled \textit{A New Negro for a New Century: An Accurate and Up-to-Date Record of the Upward Struggles of the Negro Race}. Williams contributed an essay, “The Colored Woman and Her Part in Racial Regeneration,” which included portraits of successful black women.
\textsuperscript{154} Ibid, 229.
business activities. Similarly, the widely successful entrepreneur Madame C. J. Walker used photography to display her wealth and successes. In a description of one particular image, she is described as dressed in a delicate ivory lace bodice. The thick fabric belt she wears cinches in her waist, which accentuates her full-figured body. The only sign of her former life as a farm worker and washerwoman is her muscled forearms. Like Mitchell, her hair is also a key signifier in the image in that it signals class and social consciousness: it is pinned into a carefully coifed crown that swoops away from her face. Women who saw the photo not only saw a woman of considerable achievement, they also immediately wished to enroll in her courses and make use of her hair treatments.\textsuperscript{155} Indicative of the genre of portraiture, the portraits created throughout the period were replete with props and elaborate backdrops. The painted exteriors and interiors and, in some cases, availability of stored clothing in the studio for use in the images by photographic subjects, reflect how the images were, as Willis points out, both performance and “situated within the notion of the real.”\textsuperscript{156} Scholar of black visual

\textsuperscript{155} Willis notes that in addition to the proliferation of self and family portraits, emerging black press publications, such as \textit{Half Century Magazine}, \textit{The New York Age}, and \textit{The Chicago Defender}, sought to refute stereotypical imagery of black life by circulating images of black cultural beauty and dignity. Many of the publications solicited images from their readers to publish in their presses. DuBois would often include images of black women who personified what was considered an idealized type of black women on the covers of \textit{Crisis} magazine. This type emphasized beauty, uniqueness, accomplishment, intelligence, industriousness, talent and success. When held up against the degrading black imagery produced by the larger culture, Willis argues, the images that appeared on the cover of \textit{Crisis} and throughout a number of other cultural mediums produced an alternative visual taxonomy in which to interpret black life. See Willis, “\textit{Picturing the New Negro Woman},” 230-240.

\textsuperscript{156} Ibid, 236.
culture and photography Leigh Raiford concurs. Images that proliferated the early 20th century were, she writes, “at once performances of idealized identity and documents of dignified lifestyles.”

By the mid 20th century, many black photographers were approaching photography through an emphasis on documentary or social landscape photography. Many were following in a tradition shaped by Gordon Parks and Charles “Teenie” Harris, two black photographers who used their photographic practice to make visual accounts of the discrimination, violence and day-to-day evils of racism. Parks, who later had a storied and celebrated career as staff photographer at Life magazine, began his photographic work as a fellow at the Farm Security Administration (FSA). There, he contributed photographs to the documentary photography effort directed by photographer Roy Stryker. Among the many seminal images Parks took throughout his career were his early FSA documentary photographs of Ella Watson, a black woman who worked as a custodian in government buildings in Washington, D.C. in the 1940s. Parks’s series of images included Watson in her sparse home, tending to her grandchildren, and worshipping among parishioners at her church. It also included views of Watson’s segregated neighborhood from her window. As reflected in the now renowned image entitled American Gothic in which Watson is pictured standing in front of an American

158 Willis, Reflections in Black, 89-90.
159 Ibid, 89.
flag with a broom and a mop, he also captured her at work cleaning the floors of
government offices.\textsuperscript{160} Parks ultimately understood the images to be an exposé on racial
injustice and bigotry: there was no better way to convey and combat the evils of racism
and poverty “than to show the people who suffered most under it.”\textsuperscript{161} Similarly, Harris
made extensive documentation of black life in segregated Pittsburgh. His images covered
a wide-range of subjects, including protests of discriminatory employment practices as
well as black social institutions, such as churches and fraternities. According to Willis,
Harris’s work attested to both black protest traditions and a thriving sense of black life.\textsuperscript{162}

Willis’s analysis of the images along with Parks’s own commentary speak to how
the images were employed to register an oppositional critique against white racism by
documenting the particular plight of black people as they experienced poverty, racial
violence and other forms of inequity throughout the post-Depression period and into the
Civil Rights era. Yet, Willis’s observations about the ways in which Harris’s images

\textsuperscript{160} For more on \textit{American Gothic}, see Lisa Farrington, \textit{African-American Art: A Visual
and Cultural History} (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017). Farrington points out
that Parks’s image provides is a striking juxtaposition to Grant Wood’s 1930 painting of
the same name. In it, a stoic farmer and his daughter stand before a white clapboard
house. In his hands, the man holds a pitchfork. Their rigid poses, lean physiques and
placement on either side of the gothic window recall, according to Farrington, Gothic
statuary and religious morality. In Parks’s image, Ella Watson is a singular figure.
Clothed in her cleaning uniform in front of the flag, she is also rigidly posed. Instead of a
pitchfork, she holds a broom in one hand and a mop in the other. According to
Farrington, instead of the open air of the Woods image, she is “defined and confined” by
the indoor setting and her status as property. What is reflected between the two images
are two divergent types of American workers and telling statement concerning racial
inequity and segregation.
\textsuperscript{161} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{162} Ibid, 90.
reflect a thriving sense of black life also suggests that there is potentially even more at work in the images, both in and beyond their visual critique of racism. To read the documentary images by Parks and Harris through appositional black aesthetic would be to interrogate what this thriving black community in Pittsburgh entailed. What might Parks’s images of the spaces, people and daily encounters that formed Ella Watson’s life generatively reveal about the particular social structures and ways of being that attend black life? While the work of Parks and Harris can certainly be read through an appositional black aesthetic, Roy DeCarava, a contemporary of Parks and Harris in the documentary genre, took an approach to black image-making that perhaps lends itself even more to an appositional black aesthetic interpretation. Art historian Lisa Farrington points out that DeCarava deliberately avoided “a sociological approach” to photography in favor of one that emphasized black people “as subjects worthy of art.”\textsuperscript{163} In particular, this meant creating intimate, introspective images that aimed to provide what Farrington articulates as an “insider’s portrait of Harlem rather than merely a document.”\textsuperscript{164} His 1955 work entitled \textit{The Sweet Flypaper of Life} reflects this approach.\textsuperscript{165} Accompanied by prose and poetry written by Langston Hughes, the work chronicles the everyday monotony, struggles, triumphs and relational interactions of black Harlemites as told through the eyes of fictional character, Sister Mary Bradley.\textsuperscript{166} The wide variety of images included street photographs of urban storefronts, children at play, people standing

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{163} Farrington, 209.
\item \textsuperscript{164} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{165} Roy DeCarava and Langston Hughes, \textit{The Sweet Flypaper of Life} (New York: Hill and Wang, 1955).
\item \textsuperscript{166} Ibid.
\end{itemize}
on the picket line, women reading on the subway and sitters lost in thought on the stoop, as well as domestic images of men playing with their children and house party gatherings. Through DeCarava’s technique of using available light and rejecting the harsh contrasts produced by a camera flash, he created meditative, shadowy depth depictions from which to explore the subtle and often hidden intricacies of black life.\textsuperscript{167}

Importantly for the history of black photography and, more specifically, for historically situating Weems’s photographic practice, DeCarava signaled a shift from the use of photography for portraiture or as a tool of sociological and documentary study to an approach to the medium as an art form. In 1954, he opened one of the first galleries in the United States dedicated to the exhibition and sale of photography as fine art.\textsuperscript{168} As noted above, Weems credits DeCarava and those who followed his influence in the 1960s and 70s through the Kamoinge Group as early influences. Nevertheless, Weems’s own entrée into photography also signals yet another developmental shift in black photography. Although her work reflects resonances with the meditative aesthetic quality of DeCarava’s black and white images, her intermedia practice that moves away from presumed and absolute trust in the photographic medium is in line with postmodern approaches to photography and art practice, particularly conceptual art. Art historian Lisa Gail Collins helps to situate Weems in this context through her assertion that the artist was part of a “third wave” of African American artistic and intellectual movement

\textsuperscript{167} Farrington, 210. According to Farrington, DeCarava called this technique and the effect it produced in his photographs “infinite tonal scale of grey.”
\textsuperscript{168} Willis, \textit{Reflections in Black}, 116.
during the 1980s. This contemporary wave of cultural production was linked to its predecessors—the 1920s New Negro Movement and the 1960s and 70s Black Arts Movement—through its continued emphasis on the view that black culture deserves aesthetic consideration. Nevertheless, as Collins argues, this third wave was particularly marked by factors that distinguished it from its predecessors. Central among these factors was the emergence of intellectual theories of postmodernism that led artists to interrogate and level critiques against prevailing assumptions in the field of art, photography and art history. These interrogations and critiques involved aesthetic practices that examined notions of contradiction and variance over and against cohesion and universality, as well as practices that pieced together various influences, from popular culture to high theory, and that experimented with previously overlooked histories, subjects, sites, and assumptions about black life. Indicative of these larger


170 Ibid. Collins identifies three key factors that distinguish the third wave of African American art and intellectual movement from its predecessors. In addition to the emergence of postmodern ideas, the other factors were: 1) African Americans gained access to art schools in increasing numbers during this time period, with black women in particular taking advantage of this increased access and 2) the base of potential buyers of art created by African Americans expanded.

171 Ibid. Here, for example, Collins delineates the ways in which Allison Saar and other contemporary black women artists, including Emma Amos and Renee Stout, confront the burdened history of the black female nude and the accompanying tensions of race, gender and sexuality that have led to a paucity of such images in modern art. In particular, according to Collins, Saar employs her sculpture practice not only to boldly represent the oft avoided nude image, but also to wrest it away from Western visual economies that reduce the figure to exotica and erotica by recasting it in more complex ways, one in which it is depicted as sensual and yet also somewhat guarded. Collins also notes the work of third-wave artist Jeanne Montoussamy-Ashe and her photographic series on Daufuskie Island, located off the coast of Georgia and South Carolina. She argues that Montoussamy-Ashe uses photography to question cultural assumption about the agrarian
aesthetic shifts and trends, Weems’s *Family Pictures* is an audio-text-image installation that riffs on traditional assumptions of documentary photography. In the following section, I will discuss this dynamic artistic approach and the ways in which its multidimensional form especially lends itself to a delineation of the rich, layered contours of black social life that mark an appositional black aesthetic. These contours involve complex, generative ways of being as well as alternative logics and family structures that exist beyond and in excess of categorical representational frames, such as “positive and negative” interpretive categories and other prescribed norms and social designations. This appositional black aesthetic rendering not only gives detail to the black religious quest for expansive ways of being, but, more specifically, it situates black social life as the context out of which this quest emerges.

2.4. Re-Situating Black Religion through Appositional Black Aesthetics

Weems’s *Family Pictures* was created in part as a rejoinder to “The Negro Family: The Case for National Action,” commonly known as the “Moynihan Report” published in
The report, written by Daniel Patrick Moynihan, attributed what the politician and sociologist argued was the social and economic deterioration of black families, particularly among the black lower class, to a pathological collapse of the nuclear family structure in black families, as principally evidenced by the preponderance of black women-led households. Strikingly, although *Family Pictures* was created in response to Moynihan’s treatise, the retort offered by the series is not one that hinges on positing a corrective or a categorically oppositional take that salvages the public image of the black family through adherence to conventional representational codes, such as those associated with dominant ideologies of the nuclear family. In a way that reflects an appositional black aesthetic, Weems’s series is not premised upon disavowing the alterity of black family life. Rather, to draw from Moten—the series not only resides in the alterity, but it relishes in it, it “discovers and enters into it” through a depiction of alternative familial structures and ways of being that are varied, complicated, lush, and open-ended. It is in this way that it offers not only a rendering of the black religious

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172 Critics who have written about *Family Pictures* commonly note that the work was created in response to the Moynihan Report. Strikingly, however, these accounts do not provide an extensive delineation into exactly how Weems responds to the Report and the implications of what the series adds to conceptions of the black family. In her attention to the work, curator and critic Kathryn Delmez notes that, in response to the report’s denigration of the black family, Weems “did not hide the various problems her family faced.” Yet, Delmez contends, Weems is careful to present the issues in a broader context to offer a “more complete and empathetic view.” While I agree with Delmez’s contention that Weems’s render her family’s experiences with, for instance, unemployment within a larger context of racial discrimination, her rendering is not so much angling for an empathetic view. As I delineate below, her inclusion of what would be considered unseemly behaviors and choices by some of her family members complicates an fully empathetic read.

concern with more expansive ways of being, but it situates this expansiveness as rooted
in black social life. Such a depiction is made possible in and through the series’s
subversive riff on an operating premise at work in traditional documentary photography:
the notion that photographs have a singular, objective authority to communicate broad,
invariable ideas about its subject(s). As I will discuss below, Weems mitigates the
singular authority of the photographic medium by staging an interaction between the
images, the text and the audio. What results is a hybrid piece that reflects and delineates
the multidimensional, expansive contours of black family life in both form and content.

Concerning *Family Pictures*, Weems has stated that within her body of work, it is
the first piece that signaled her shift away from more traditional documentary practice
through the incorporation of other mediums. “There’s a wonderful kind of play that
happens,” she observes, “when you’re able to use other materials, whether they are other
surfaces or language, to play around with, to stretch and push out the photograph.”
This kind of playing and stretching expands photographic meaning beyond the “tiny

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174 Smith, “Fragmented Documents,” 246. In noting Weems’s subversive, intermedia
approach to documentary photography that displaces the sole authority of the photograph,
I draw from Smith, who makes a similar argument in her treatment of Weems’s 1995
series of images entitled, *From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried*. This chapter
builds on and extends Smith’s observations concerning Weems’s relationship to
documentary photography by demonstrating how indications of this subversive,
intermedia approach can be traced even further back to the artist’s first major work.
Weems’s earlier works, entitled *Environmental Portraits* (1978) and *S.E. San Diego*
(1983) follow a more formal approach to documentary photography. The photographs are
the sole medium there is the assumption that images alone reflect “unedited truths” about
the personal and social dynamics of neighborhoods in Portland, OR and San Diego, CA,
respectively. See Kirsh, 10-11.
176 Benner, 4.
space” of the photograph, she asserts.177 For Weems, her interests in photography are not so much about the techniques of the medium itself, but what she can “do” with the medium, the ways in which it can be employed to convey particular ideas.178 This kind of interest is indicative of Weems’s approach to photography as a conceptual art form, an approach she was able to explore and hone while a student in the visual arts department at UCSD. The department was one that sought to create an intellectual space in which to engage in critical and innovative approaches to documentary practice. This involved disrupting and moving away from purist notions of photography that maintained the medium’s association with objective truth, authority and transparency.179 Instead of the singularity of a static image, the department emphasized a conceptual artistic approach to documentary that involved intermedia practices and the inclusion of a great deal of context and referential connection to the social world.180

It is through this conceptual practice of a hybrid, intermedia approach that Weems projects a conception of family premised upon alternative relational configurations and gender practices that push the limits of normative representations of family. In the image-text-audio installation, the photographs, to draw from the work of art critic and UCSD alum Alan Sekula, are treated as common cultural artifacts—instead privileged objects—

177 Ibid, 4-5.
178 Ibid.
180 Ibid, 14-73.
within an extended narrative structure.\textsuperscript{181} Instead of the assumption that meaning emerges entirely from the image, the photograph is understood to be an “incomplete utterance” that relies on other outside factors to contribute additional context.\textsuperscript{182} The mediums of text and audio each add an additional dimension to the photographs. Taken together, their interaction works to complicate and upend modern notions of nuclear family structures. For instance, while most of the text captions describe Weems’s immediate family, including her mother, father, and siblings, the images and audio interject with accounts of a host of extended relatives and family friends who constitute the family. One image appears to have been taken at a reunion or another type of family celebration; a man standing with his back to the camera and with his arms outstretched toward the family appears to be making a valiant attempt to organize them for a family picture. But he does so to no avail as the full multigenerational extent of the family extends beyond the frame. The text captions that chronicle Weems’s immediate family members work together with this image, along with those that picture elderly women in the family with their gray hair made prominent by the black and white photo lens, to convey that the family is not of the strictly self-contained nuclear sort that defined modern notions of family.\textsuperscript{183} Jo Spence notes that within Western society, such ideas of family, which date back to visual representations of the family in Renaissance portraiture, rendered the family as a


“universal,” insular unit in that it was considered impenetrable to the forces of history and larger power relationships. In her study of “familial looking,” Marianne Hirsch concurs and adds that even as formal portraits have been replaced by the casual “Kodak” family snapshot, remnants of the self-contained family unit persist in dominant familial myths and ideologies that support “circumscribed and static self-representations of the family [that] close it off from scrutiny and critique.” Taken together, the family structure that emerges between the caption text and the images is one that is constituted by both Weems’s immediate and extended family, complicating a strict notion of a self-contained nuclear family. The audio account makes the boundaries between immediate and extended families even more porous and open-ended while also chronicling the family’s experiences with domestic abuse issues and their vulnerabilities to larger social and political factors throughout its historical lineage.

In particular, the audio provides substantive accounts of her extended family members in that go beyond merely charting the family tree. The accounts include the migration experiences of her great aunt Avie and great grandmother Bessie. Her grandmother Ozzie is described as a “free spirit,” while family lore suggests that the death of her great Uncle Clayborn, a man notorious for his violence against women, came at the hands of his wife who was seeking to protect herself from his abuse. Notably, Weems does not edit the audio so as to remove what could be considered less than

flattering aspects of her family life. She thus presents a rendering of her family as not only extended and multigenerational, but also subject to scrutiny and critique. Moreover, rather than an idea of a self-contained family unit that is outside of history and larger power relationships, the audio chronicles the ways in which bonds of kinship among the Weems family were formed in and through their experiences in history with racial oppression. In Weems’s mother’s account of her upbringing working as a sharecropper on a plantation, she notes that her grandmother lived and worked on a different plantation from her children and their families. But despite the distance, Weems’s mother recalls forging a strong bond with her grandmother and her grandmother’s husband, Joshua, who indulged her love for grapes. Joshua, the narrative suggests, was not of blood relation to Weems’s mother. Nevertheless, it was through her playful interactions with him that she was given the family nickname “mule” for her stubbornness. Weems’s mother also recounts how she met her husband while working as a sharecropper. As she grew up, her family and her husband’s family worked on neighboring farms and shared familial and communal life together. They would later work together on the Charles Gillet plantation, where they lived out their work and family life with six or seven other families who also worked the land. This particular account of a familial structure that is constituted by both biological and non-biological forms of relation is indicative of the fluid configurations of family that have historically characterized black kinship structures. Here, the work of black critical theorist Hortense Spillers contextualizes and provides a reference point from which to think through the stakes of these alternative structures for theorizing black religion.
For Spillers, black alternative structures of family are a distinct outgrowth of the ways in which black familial structures were relegated outside of the white cultural norm of the nuclear family configurations—and their attendant notions of patrilineal bloodline and vertical transfer of social titles and entitlements—as a fundamental, imposed condition of the Middle Passage captivity and enslavement.\footnote{Hortense J. Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book” \textit{Diacritics} (Summer 1987): 74. See also Deborah McDowell, “Viewing the Remains: A Polemic on Death, Spectacle and the [Black] Family,” in Marianne Hirsch, ed. \textit{The Familial Gaze} (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1999). McDowell argues that even the term “the black family” has been historically cast as the negative obverse of the white familial culture norm, such that the ultimate signifier of the collapse and failure of the nuclear family is, as McDowell puts it, “colored black.”} Within this context, captive persons “were forced into patterns of dispersal” not according to bloodline, but pursuant with the legal dictates of slavery.\footnote{Spillers, 75.} Further, the violence that constituted slavery as an institution effectively exploded normative gender categories among the enslaved.\footnote{Ibid, 67-68.} That is, through a process of systematic “ungendering” wherein gendered domestic life and attachments according to bloodline were denied and the brutality of slavery was meted out equally upon enslaved men and women, strict demarcations between male and female genders were blurred.\footnote{Ibid.} Under these conditions, any form of kinship that enslaved black folks managed to cultivate was always already something other than nuclear family configurations.\footnote{Ibid, 75.} \textit{Family Pictures} attests to this: Weems is not concerned with rendering her black familial structure within the strict self-contained parameters of a normative nuclear family framework. Rather, in a way that demonstrates
appositional aesthetics, the text-audio-image interaction provides a detailed rendering of
black social life by projecting the ways in which her family has forged their own forms of
familial configurations in, through and in excess of what white supremacist violence of
forced dispersal and economic disparity allow. In particular, Weems’s account reflects
how the configuration of her family was formed and shaped by the kinship bonds
between multiple families who shared life together while working as sharecroppers. Her
family thus follows in the lineage of enslaved black people who, according to Spillers,
created alternative, horizontal kinship connections “across the landscape to others, often
sold hand to hand, of the same and different blood in a common fabric of memory and
inspiration.”\(^\text{191}\) It is this black social life, wherein black people forge alternative and more
extensive familial configurations, that constitutes the ground, the rich context out of
which, black people engage and live into the push for more expansive ways of being that
defines the nature of black religion.

In addition to rendering the multigenerational, biological and non-biological ways
in which the family is structured, the interaction between the mediums in *Family Pictures*
also provide an alternative to the conventions of the nuclear family through its particular

\(^{191}\) Ibid. Spillers, also writing in response to the Moynihan Report, notes that while these
alternative kinship connections are coded as pathological by Moynihan and others, they
usher in the existence and possibility for more extensive, variable and fluid kinship
relations that breach the patriarchal family structures premised upon property relations.
For more on the possibility of black kinship connections and configurations constituted
by variableness and fluidity, see also Elizabeth Abel, “Domestic Borders, Cultural
Boundaries: Black Feminists Re-view the Family” in Marianne Hirsch, ed. *The Familial
depiction of gender roles and norms. That Weems’s mother and father are said to have worked together on the plantation points to another way in which *Family Pictures* complicates conventional notions of patriarchal nuclear family structures by projecting more egalitarian gender roles. To be sure, there are instances in the series that reify such notions, particularly the text description of Weems’s brother, nicknamed “Son-Son.” He is described as a hardworking man who “believes that a man ain’t a man if he can’t provide for his family and that ‘America wouldn’t be shit without the working man.” His belief rings as a bit sanctimonious, if not cartoonish, however, when held up against an image of his mother at work in a clothing factory as well as other visual and textual renderings of women working or being concerned with the financial provisions of the family. One photograph captures a man and a woman engaged in counting money or perhaps making some type of financial transaction. Taken in a bedroom, the photograph has a tight frame; the bed in the room takes over the bulk of the image. The man sits on the bed off to the left, his hand pulling from one of two stacks of dollar bills on the bed. On the other side of the image, the woman leans on the bed, her hand on her hip as she keenly takes in the business at hand. The presence of the man and the woman who participate together in this financial dealing, compounded with their physical stance as two anchors on either side of the photograph, suggests an egalitarian relationship between the two of them. While the two pictured could be a romantic couple, they could also be read as business partners, or both. In another text description, Weems’s oldest sister Alice is described in somewhat similar fashion as her brother, Son-Son, though perhaps without the sense of patriarchal, working-class nationalism. Described as a “no jive—tough—kinda woman, taking no slack from nobody for no reason,” Alice will “do anything to
hold it together financially when it comes to family and the home.” The egalitarian renderings of men and women in *Family Pictures* attest to somewhat complicated and, in some cases, alternative gender roles and familial structures that upend conventional gender roles and family structures.

In addition to a rendering of family that entails more expansive familial structures that include not only extended family, but also those of blood and non-blood relation and that trouble strict demarcations of gender roles, *Family Pictures* also chronicles family members who engage in particular acts and postures of nonconformity that situate them outside of what Queer theorist Cathy Cohen refers to as the “normative moral super structure.”¹⁹² This structure is one premised not only upon the assumed importance of the nuclear family and heterosexual patriarchal gender roles, but also on the efficiency of the capitalist system and the regulation of intimate sexual relations.¹⁹³ Through Weems’s inclusion of text captions that accompany some of the images, the ways in which some members of the family create a life and operate in ways that exceed or fall outside this structure are brought to the fore. Importantly, unlike traditional documentary practice, the captions in *Family Pictures* do more than merely describe what or who appears in the images. As Sekula posits, the inclusion of text can also be used to interplay with the images. That is, to “anchor, contradict, reinforce, subvert, complement, particularize or

¹⁹³ Ibid.
go beyond the meanings offered by the images themselves.” 194 The captions in Weems’s series provide an additional elaboration and particularization to those pictured. 195

For instance, in a photograph of Weems’s sister Vera, the woman sits around a table with a man who appears to be her brother, Joe-Joe. Vera has her hands around a cocktail glass. A pack of cigarettes sits just beyond her reach. She gives a side-eye in the direction of her brother and his companion. Vera’s image is one of playfulness. The caption that accompanies the image provides further elaboration and particularization that cannot be gleaned from the image:

Vera is as fast as they come; worked the streets for a couple of years, has two babies, a man name Money Mack, and absolutely no idea what she wants to do with herself. I keep telling her its o.k. if she doesn’t know what she wants to do, but that she sho-better no what she doesn’t want to do. But she’s my baby-sister and I love her like she was my own.

In another image, Weems captures her brother John standing in the yard of their home. Two dogs stand at his side. In the caption, Weems describes him:

John is free man; he’s a rolling stone—a wanderer. Can’t keep a job for nothing in the world; all he wants is to play his guitar, walk his dogs and love his women. He’s a big burly sorta guy, strong as an ox. If you saw him coming down a dark street you’d try your best to avoid him. But he’s gentle as a lamb, sweet as can be.

194 Sekula, Dismantling Modernism, 60.
195 Weems’s use of text captions along with her images bears striking resemblance to the work of other black documentarians, most especially Roy Decarva’s 1955 work entitled The Sweet Flypaper of Life. The work included DeCarava’s textured images of 1950s black Harlem with an accompanying narrative written by Langston Hughes.
Both text captions provide further elaborations on the characteristics and personalities of Vera and John, respectively, beyond what the camera can offer. In particular, the captions for both images refer to Vera’s and John’s lack of steady employment and/or, in Vera’s case, experience in the informal economies of “the streets.” A similar reference is made in the caption that accompanies the aforementioned image of Weems’s sister Alice. She is said to “play bingo so she can make the rent, the lights or anything else that needs taking care of.” These references mark an appositional aesthetic at work through their attention to the alternative orientations toward and engagements with the economy that play out in the context of black social life. Cohen’s theorization of “deviant practice” among some of the most marginal in black communities is useful in delineating this point. According to Cohen, deviant practice refers to the ways in which individuals with little power in society use the limited agency available to them to engage in counter normative behaviors that situate their lives outside of dominant normalized frameworks of society. They engage in such behaviors in an effort to secure small levels of autonomy for themselves and in pursuit of goals such as pleasure, desire, recognition and respect. Importantly for my concerns with proffering an appositional black aesthetic that delineates the push for more fuller,

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196 In my use of the term “informal economy,” I draw from the work of historian Victoria Wolcott concerning the forms of work black women took up outside of what were considered more respectable domestic jobs in early 20th century Detroit. Wolcott generally defines the term as “economic activity outside of or hidden from state regulation.” Victoria Wolcott, Remaking Respectability: African American Women in Interwar Detroit (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 95.
197 Cohen, 30.
198 Ibid.
199 Ibid, 40.
more expansive ways of being that constitutes black religion, deviant practice does more than counter and challenge the dominant order; it also has the capacity to produce new logics and frameworks by which to judge behavior. Strikingly, in *Family Pictures*, the captions that describe Vera, John and Alice speak to their lack of steady of employment in a way that is not value-laden. In her description of her sisters, Weems allows room for Vera’s exploration in terms of vocation and praises her sister Alice for her resourcefulness and quick ingenuity in doing what is necessary to make ends meet. The fact that John “can’t keep a job” seems to be more attributed to his nature as a “wanderer” than any moral failing. The caption suggests that, for John, any job he might have could potentially impede upon the ways in which he would prefer to spend most of his time: playing his guitar, spending time with his dogs, and loving multiple women. In these characterizations, Weems leaves generative space in which to consider who her siblings are beyond what they “do” and “produce” in and for a capitalist economic system.

In two other images, Weems captures her parents interacting with their grandchildren. In one of the images, Weems’s father is pictured in what appears to be a rambunctious interaction with three of his grandsons. Two children sit on his lap while he seems to struggle to keep both atop; he tilts his body perhaps to allow room for both. One of the children in his lap waves his hand in the air while the third child in the image is a blur of quick movement immediately in front of the camera lens. The lopsidedness of the

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200 Ibid.
frame attests to the playfulness of the setting. In the second image, Weems’s mother is pictured doing the hair of one of her granddaughters. She sits in bed, the child seated directly in front of her. As she gathers her granddaughter’s hair into a ponytail, her granddaughter sits patiently as though in the midst of a familiar ritual. The caption for the two images reads:

Like my mother, my sisters and I all had children by the time we were sixteen or so. So momma and daddy have plenty grandchildren. When they heard I was pregnant, daddy cried and momma seriously blew her top. Smokin’ she stormed into my bedroom one night, and in a voice trembling with rage, said, ‘What’s this mess I hear bout ya being pregnant, girl!!!’ Now ordinarily, I was humble in the face of momma’s wrath. But being pregnant had me completely bent out of shape; evil. And with a coldness that shocked even me, retorted, ‘It ain’t no mess.’ Out done and hurt she said, ‘You little fast negroes gonna drive me crazy! Get your behind out my face, for I kill ya!!

In its recollection of Weems’s parents hurt and angered reaction upon finding out about her pregnancy, the text caption provides context and complexity to the images. To be sure, teenage pregnancies were not what the Weems parents wanted for their daughters. It undoubtedly placed them under scrutiny and subject to all the structural disparities dispensed by a society that assumes, accommodates, and rewards those who abide by its normative sexual logics regarding marriage and reproduction. And yet, in their outsider status as young black single mothers, they created the potential for “counter publics” among their family and friends that involved their own meanings and creative, adaptive practices.\textsuperscript{201} These practices present the potential for alternative family,

\textsuperscript{201} Ibid, 43.
intimate, and social relationships while also making way for viable strategies for autonomy. This becomes evident in the interplay between the images and the caption. If viewed standing alone, the images appear to be a mere display of love and affection between grandparents and their grandchildren. But when viewed in the context provided by the caption, the images also suggest the possibility of shared care-taking strategies and communal practices of childrearing that, to be sure, are required in light of limited resources, but that also allow for and demonstrate more expansive ideas and imaginings of familial structure and roles.

Notably, these particular ways of being assumed by Weems’s family members are qualities that are largely considered, as Cohen’s analysis notes, improper or morally wanting within the context of dominant value systems and structures. In this way, they complicate a strictly oppositional black aesthetic and visual discourse that might seek to rescue or recover black images from stereotypes and notions of pathology. In some ways, through the depiction of jobless family members, young single mothers and egalitarian, if not women-led, family structures, it could be argued that the series verges on trafficking in stereotypes of black life, adding fuel to Moynihan’s fire. Yet, these renderings do not demonstrate a preoccupation with undoing or salvaging these images from the possibility of stereotype. Rather, they offer a nuanced take that, while not wholly uncritical of these ways of being, portray an idea of black social life that is constituted by generative

\[\text{Ibid.}\]
enactments of multidimensional ways of being and creative improvisations. It is within
and out of this context that the black religious push for fuller life plays out.

While the vibrant sociality and familial interactions that are fundamental to
Family Pictures is perhaps most immediately reflected in the text captions, audio, images
and the interaction between these three mediums, it is held together and maintained
through perhaps a fourth “sub-dimension” to the hybrid work: its unpretentious narrative
quality. Certainly, as Brian Wallis notes about the series, the first person, conversational
nature of the audio recordings and the text captions evoke “the ceaseless chatter of
everyday life.”203 Moreover, they give it a storytelling quality that upends and offsets the
typically distant, authoritarian language of realism, documentary practice, and, I would
add, government studies such as those the Moynihan Report, that is premised upon
statements of single “truths” and factual information.204 Storytelling is also inextricably
linked to social interaction, dialogue and preexistent, shared pools of meaning. By taking
a storytelling, narrative approach, Weems foregrounds both her biases and investments as
well as the ways in which no artwork is ever the exclusive product of one individual, but
rather extends out of social interaction and exchange.205

Yet, the narrative quality of Family Pictures, particularly in the caption texts,
warrants even further exploration given Weems’s burgeoning interest in folklore at this
particular juncture in her career. To understand the artist’s particular use of language in

204 Ibid.
205 Ibid., 60.
the series, the influence of Zora Neale Hurston on Weems’s interest in the rhythms and utterances of the African American vernacular tradition must be considered.\footnote{206}

Particularly of interest for Weems was the way in which Hurston’s reference and study of black customs, beliefs, sayings, stories, songs, riddles and styles provided somewhat of an unmediated perspective into what Weems saw as an enduring and viable culture, one hidden and marginal to “official” accounts of history.\footnote{207} With Hurston’s folkloric influence in mind, what Wallis identifies as Weems’s narrative use of first person, conversational language has even greater significance: the artist is tapping into the rhetorical structures of a specific black cultural vernacular tradition, more generally, and riffing on what Henry Louis Gates, Jr. theorizes as Hurston’s “speakerly text,” more specifically.\footnote{208}

In his articulation of a theory of African American literary criticism premised upon the practice of “signifying” in the black vernacular tradition, Gates posits what he refers to as Hurston’s rhetorical strategy of the “speakerly text.” First established in the African American literary tradition through Hurston’s novel \textit{Their Eyes Were Watching God}, it is strategy that involves the representation of the speaking black voice in writing.\footnote{209} It is designed to “emulate the phonetic, grammatical, and lexical patterns of

actual speech and produce the illusion of oral narration.” In the speakerly text, Gates notes, oral speech and its inherent linguistic features are privileged over other structural elements. One way in which this rhetorical strategy emerges is through the use of what Hurston delineates in her typology of “Negro Expression” as “the will to adorn” in black oral narration. This includes creative revisions and additions to conventional English standards of speaking. Hurston writes, “not only has [the Negro] softened and toned down strongly consonanted words like “aren’t” to “ain’t” and the like, he has made new force words out of old feeble elements.” This occurs through three forms of black figurative language: metaphor and simile, “double-descriptives” and “verbal-nouns.”

Aspects of these forms of adornment can be found in the text captions in *Family Pictures*. They include terms like “ain’t,” “sorta,” “’bout” and the use of double-descriptives, such as when it is written that Son-Son worked in the “hide-house.” Emblematic of the “close-fitting terms” used in black dialect and expression, hide-house involves the addition of an action word or illustration, in this case “hide,” to another word. Somewhat similarly, Alice is said to take a “cross-town bus” and Vera’s place is voluptuously described as a “big beautiful home.” Perhaps most striking in the series’s caption text is the prevalent use of figurative language, including metaphor and simile.

210 Ibid, 181.
211 Ibid.
212 Ibid, 198.
214 Ibid.
John is described as being “strong as an ox,” yet also “gentle as a lamb, sweet as can be.” Jessie is described as being so in love and consumed with satisfying her romantic partner that she is “blind in one eye and couldn’t see out the other.” Making reference to a Negro spiritual to reflect the implications of her self-sacrificial love, the caption description of Jessie concludes: “Crazy ‘bout him. I guess that’s one of the reasons she and her babies are out here wading in the water.”

Weems’s emphasis on the narrative quality of the black vernacular tradition is indicative of an appositional black aesthetic at work in the series. Through her inclusion of this form of speech, she renders a particular dialect and sound to black social life that points toward a distinct mode of communication that includes, but also extends beyond dominant forms of speaking. In rendering this narrative quality, Weems drills down into the fine intricacies of black social life to project the improvisations at work in black speech.

2.5. Conclusion

Through my attention to the multifaceted, generative ways of being as well as the alternative logics and family structures in Carrie Mae Weems’s Family Pictures, I have delineated what I call an appositional black aesthetic. This aesthetic is found in art and images that depict black life with complexity and a multidimensional openness that extends beyond categorical representational frames and prescribed norms and social designations. It is also an approach to viewing and analyzing images that is fueled by rigorous, expansive explorations into the intricacies, improvisations and nuances involved in how black life is lived. I argue that an appositional black aesthetic thus makes
two interrelated interventions: First, in its preoccupations with the rich interiority of black social life, it offers a way to view and consider black images and black image-making beyond the register of “opposition” and strategic public projection in light of objectification. Secondly, it gives detail and delineation to theorizations of black religion as a push, or quest for more expansive life options and ways of being. More specifically, it situates the black religious quest as an endeavor that extends out of the creative, improvisational context of black social life, a space “off to the side” and in excess of the dictates and norms of civil society.

Importantly, as noted above, in its emphasis on black social life, appositional black aesthetics do not bracket the violent force of white supremacy and dominant social orderings upon black lives. Rather, it is an approach that seeks to rigorously take up Elizabeth Alexander’s seminal question by interrogating not only who black people are and how we manage to live in spite of such forces, but also the ways of being as well as structures and forms of relationality that we generatively produce beyond what such forces account for or allow. Appositional black aesthetics takes a deep dive into such questions and, in so doing, provides a more expansive framework through which to consider the significance of visual images for the study of black religion.
Chapter 3

Black Religion as Enactments of the Flesh

3.1. Introduction

During a gathering in which a small group of black women scholars convened to discuss their indebtedness to the monumental work of black critical theorist Hortense Spillers, Spillers was asked to describe the impetus for what is perhaps her most studied and celebrated essay, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book.” Spillers delivered an exacting response, one teeming with provocation:

But I am like the white elephant in the room. Though you can’t talk about the era of sound in the U.S. without talking about blues and black women. You can’t talk about the eras of slavery in the Americas without talking about black women, or black men without black women and how that changes the community—there is not a subject that you can speak about in the modern world where you will not have to talk about African women and new world African women. But no one wants to address them. I felt that in 1986 and 1987 no one wanted to put a theoretical spin on this, I mean we really are invisible people. And I just kind of went nuts. And I
am saying, I am here now, and I am doing it now, and you are not going to ignore me. And so all of those essays are saying—I am here now, “Whatcha’ gonna do?”

“Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe,” Spillers insists here, constitutes a forthright confrontation, a critical showdown against “a whole repertoire of violent behavior” (be it psychological, epistemic, intellectual or otherwise) that enforces forgetfulness of black women’s presence. This presence is one that must be rigorously contended and grappled with, and not only in an effort to correct historical erasure. Black women’s presence holds profound theoretical implications: it is a vantage point, a rich perspective from which to unearth and generate discourses and epistemologies that, to be sure, speak to black women’s particular experiences, but that also disrupt, shift and expand the fundamental logics of Western social order and modes of thought.

At the time of the essay’s 1987 publication, artist Carrie Mae Weems was in her studio, working on a series of images that would reckon with this presence and ultimately, I contend, strikingly demonstrate the very theoretical interventions and possibilities for which Spillers lays the groundwork. The series, entitled *Kitchen Table Series*, was completed in 1990 and is comprised of 20 photographic images and 14 stand-

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216 Spillers, et. al., 301.

alone text panels. It would become one of Weems’s most popular works and is one in which she continues her intermedia conceptual art practice. However, in a way that marks a divergence from her earlier work that employed various mediums to riff on more traditional documentary photography to capture the larger black community and black family life, in *Kitchen Table*, Weems trains her lens and narrative focus specifically on a black female figure and the ways in which she navigates various roles, including romantic partner, mother, working professional and friend. Also distinct from her earlier work, the images are all staged and Weems herself acts as a stand-in for the black woman protagonist at the center of the series. This chapter attends to the ways in which Weems brings this black woman figure and the details of her life into view. In particular, I make the case that the black woman at the center of *Kitchen Table* is rendered through what I call an appositional black aesthetic that reconceives the nature of black religion.

In the previous chapter, I began delineating what I refer to as an appositional black aesthetic at work in Weems’s visual art and its particular implications for black religion. Appositional black aesthetics are reflected in art and images that depict black life with complexity and a type of multidimensional openness that extends beyond categorical representational frames of “positive” and “negative” images, as well as prescribed norms and social designations. The term also marks an approach to viewing or analyzing images that emphasizes expansive explorations into how black life is lived; it is fueled by careful attention to the complicated nuances, creative improvisations, and alternative social and relational logics that constitute black social life. Through such an emphasis, I contend that this aesthetic offers an analytical device or tool through which to consider the significance of black visual images to the study of black religion. That is,
appositional black aesthetics—as it is reflected in visual art and as an approach to viewing and analyzing visual art—provides detail and delineation to Anthony Pinn’s theorization of black religion as a quest for complex subjectivity, which he defines as an impulse or push toward more expansive life options and ways of being. What’s more, as I argued in the previous chapter, it situates the black religious “push” as a dynamic that extends out of the generative context of black social life.

I continue my explication of appositional black aesthetics and black religion in this chapter through an examination of the particular interaction Weems creates between the mediums of text, image and performance art in rendering her protagonist. Through this examination, I make three related arguments: first, the appositional black aesthetics at work in *Kitchen Table Series* provides yet another visual reference point in which to further consider the black religious quest for complex subjectivity, or more expansive ways of being. In the first section of the chapter, I demonstrate how this aesthetics appears in the series through the rigorous back-and-forth, push-and-pull interaction between text and image that produces varied, at times contrary, at times similar, but rarely harmonious claims concerning the protagonist and the lived innerworkings of her life as she navigates romantic desire, friendship and motherhood. Black religion comes into view by way of this aesthetic representation of the complicated range of personal characteristics and perspectives that orient the black woman’s life and thus render her capacity for complex ways of being that elude and exceed hard-and-fast representational categorizations. Second, and relatedly, inasmuch as the appositional black aesthetic at work in *Kitchen Table* reflects Pinn’s idea of black religion, it also complicates its conceptual framing. That is, the theoretical grounding of this aesthetic in Fred Moten’s
idea of “appositionality” necessarily calls for an alternative way in which to conceive of the black religious endeavor beyond what I will delineate in the second section as the fraught classificatory paradigm of subjectivity. In turning a more focused attention in the third section to the particular dynamics of Weems’s performance of the protagonist in the series, I argue that the work offers this alternative through her performance of what visual theorist Nicole Fleetwood refers to as “excess flesh enactments.” These performances, in which the artist renders her own body as the focus of the viewer’s gaze, expose the limits of the regulating aims of the visual field that classify black people according to subjectivity’s racialized paradigmatic frame. Rather than categorically classified within this paradigm, the depiction of the protagonist constitutes what Spillers refers to as “black female flesh ungendered,” an existence that exceeds the dominant symbolic orderings of gender. In this way, rather than a protagonist that seeks inclusion within subjectivity’s classificatory frame, Weems’s performance is such that it characterizes the protagonist as one who relishes in the rich possibility of black female excessiveness that continually breaches the classificatory confines of the dominant social order. Thus, this chapter posits the black religious push for fuller, expansive ways of being as a generative enactment of the flesh. In this theoretical conceptualization, black religion becomes the locus point

220 In my delineation of this conception of black religion further in the chapter, I note that Fleetwood’s use of the category of the flesh is drawn from Spillers. The conception of black religion as a “generative enactment of the flesh” is informed by both Fleetwood’s reference to the “flesh” as a performative analytic and Spillers’s reference to the term as a
of possibility for complex, open, ever-shifting ways of being that always already exceed
the regulating social logics of dominant society and its prescribed ontologies.

### 3.2. Kitchen Table Series: An Appositional Black Aesthetic Rendering
### of Black Religion

As noted in the previous chapter, Weems’s use of multiple mediums in her
conceptual art practice was significantly informed by both her interests in black folklore
and narrative traditions as well as her time as a student in the visual arts department at the
University of California, San Diego, a program known for its tradition of questioning the
singular authority given to photographic images. Importantly, her use of the technique,
specifically the inclusion of text with her images in *Kitchen Table Series*, is also
reflective of the larger contemporaneous trends and debates in the field of visual art. Art
historian Kellie Jones points out that Weems is part of a cadre of women of color artists
who combined text with photography in the late 1980s/early 1990s. These artists,
including Lorna Simpson, Pat Ward Williams, and Ingrid Pollard, shared a common
interest in using the technique to make visible women’s lives and experiences and, as
Jones writes, portray them as legitimate starting points for art-making. However,

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way of being. I contend that through her performance of Fleetwood’s notion of “excess
flesh enactments,” the protagonist exceeds subjectivity’s regulating logics and is instead
constituted as Spillers notion of “black female flesh ungendered.”

221 Kellie Jones, “In Their Own Image” in Jacqueline Bobo, ed. *Black Feminist Cultural

222 Ibid. Jones focuses specifically on American and British women of color artists who
employed text-and-image in their work during this time period. While Weems, Simpson,
unlike white women artists such as Barbara Kruger and Jenny Holzer, who also employed the technique to similar ends, these artists were particularly concerned with rendering the experiences of women in ways that attended to questions of racial and cultural identity.

More specifically, as women of African, Asian, or Caribbean descent living in the United States and Britain, they nuanced and extended emerging postmodern aesthetic approaches that emphasized conceptions of the self and identity as fragmented and dispersed. Jones points out that in ways that reflected W. E. B. DuBois’s turn of the century conception of black life as living “behind the veil,” the text-and-image work of these particular artists rendered the always already fragmented existence experienced by women of color who live their lives “in, but not entirely of the dominant culture.”

Weems’s text-and-image work in *Kitchen Table* reflects the common aims and interests in gender and cultural identity that she shared with other women of color artists during the period. Yet, her work also has its own distinctiveness among these other artists, specifically in the prominent and extensive place she gives to text and narrative through her stand-alone text panels. Comparatively, Simpson, Pollard and Ward

Ward Williams and Sligh are American, Pollard is British. The other artists included in her analysis are Britons Zarina Bhimji, Roshini Kempadoo, and Mitra Tabrizian. According to Jones, each of these artists were interested in expanding their earlier documentary photography practice through the incorporation of text in ways that would expose and expand the implicit meanings and assumptions in traditional photography. In addition to her arguments concerning the similar ways in which the artists employ text-and-image to similar ends, Jones also argues that, together, their works constitute a type of international dialogue with one another concerning the parameters of text-and-image as well as racial and cultural identity.

Ibid, 175.
Ibid.
Williams, for instance, tend to be more judicious with their use of text and often incorporate it into the visual image itself. Much of Simpson’s work during this period includes small plaques with one-word descriptions, phrases, and alliterations. In *Five Day Forecast*, Simpson places five plaques that each read an alliterated description, such as “misdescription,” “misdiagnose,” and “misidentify,” under the same enlarged image of a black woman figure. The image has been replicated five times to represent each day of the week. The text-and-image work points to the various ways black women are misinterpreted in their everyday lives while working in professional settings. In her series entitled *Pastoral Interlude*, Pollard questions the notions of individual freedom and transcendence that are often associated with the English countryside. Brief, but pointed captions that speak to the isolation and violence experienced by people of color in such settings—such as, “…feeling I don’t belong. Walks through leafy glades with a baseball bat by my side.”—are placed just below images of a black woman sitting in and walking through the countryside. While Ward Williams uses text in a similarly succinct and pithy way as Simpson and Pollard in her works *Everybody Else* and *Depth of a River*, there are indeed instances when she includes substantial text. In what is perhaps her most prominent work, *Accused/Blowtorch/Padlock*, Ward Williams gives critical commentary on lynching photography, specifically a found image of a lynching that was published in *Life Magazine*. With an image of a black body that has been blowtorched and padlocked to a tree centered in the middle of the frame, text that appears to be feverishly

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225 Ibid, 177.
226 Ibid.
hand-written in chalk and that expresses critical disbelief at the creation of the image and its eventual publication—for instance, “Who took this picture? Can you be black and look at this?”—surrounds the image on each side. Yet, even as the work includes copious amounts of text that almost dwarfs the image, the text is employed in more of a referential way. It refers to and gains meaning in and through its direct claims concerning what is pictured in the image. The presence of text and its relationship to visual images is presented somewhat differently in *Kitchen Table*. Not only does Weems include a more extensive amount of narrative text, but the ways in which it is prominently situated in the work give it a type of autonomy in its relation to the photographs. While the text panels and images both refer to the black woman pictured in the images, rather than a straightforward referential elaboration of what is pictured, the images often pose contradictions and nuances to the text panels, and vice versa. I contend that what is created, then, is a work that is constituted by a dynamic, interactive tension between two independent mediums. This interaction produces an appositional black aesthetic, such that it creates a complex depiction of the black woman figure and the intricacies of her life in ways that exceed one-dimensional stereotypes or hard-and-fast, binary positive/negative image representational categorization. More specifically, as I delineate below, it is a depiction that is constituted by a nuanced, irresolvable complexity wherein the black woman is described through a multiplicity of narratives and ways of being.

To be sure, critics have acknowledged Weems’s use of both text and image in *Kitchen Table* to interrogate themes of race, gender, monogamy, motherhood and domesticity. Nevertheless, this acknowledgement is often made in a way that lacks nuanced, critical consideration concerning how Weems brings text and image together in
the series. This is largely due to the ways in which the interaction between the two mediums is uncritically assumed to be a complementary interaction that exists without tension. For instance, concerning the relationship between text and image in the series, critic Vivian Patterson writes, “images, coupled with text panels, result in portraits of a young African American woman in the company of female friends, children, and the occasional male visitor, creating a series of contemporary and very poignant vignettes.”

Patterson’s description here speaks little of the interaction between mediums, only that they are placed together, presumably harmoniously, to produce what is ultimately a visual account of the woman’s life. In his assessment of the presence of text and image in the series, critic Franklin Sirmans contends that Weems’ work is “almost as much about the act of writing as about the process of making art and, evidently, performance and acting.” According to Sirmans, the “thick with writing” text panels “correspond to different parts of the work.” That the text panels correspond with the images suggests that the text describes or narrates the visual medium. Curator Kathryn Delmez provides a similar understanding of the interaction between text and image as she notes that the words employed in a number of Weems’ art pieces, including Kitchen Table, “are meant to guide the viewer into the work.”

Notably, each of these critics describe the relationship between text and image in Weems’s work in ways that locate the text as a secondary medium to the images, such that the text panels work in service to the photographs. Yet, in her own commentary about her work, Weems describes the relationship between the two mediums as though neither takes predominance. Rather, the work itself is constituted by the way they interact with one another in complex tension. In a discussion with critic bell hooks about her 1988 piece entitled *Ain’t Jokin’*, a series in which racist jokes are written in typeset underneath photographs of black men, women and children, Weems asserts,

> there will always be this kind of tension between what you see within the photograph and what you see beneath it, with the text always cutting through. Hopefully, then, for the viewer, there would be a curious pull between what you see and the way this subject has been flipped and undermined by the power of humor, of the racist joke.  

In contrast to the ways that critics analyze her incorporation of text and images into her work, Weems contends that neither medium plays a primarily dominant role in her work, nor should they be immediately assumed complementary. hooks elaborates on this dynamic when, in the same discussion, she notes, “the meanings of the images are altered by the text. People may initially assume that these images are familiar, even ethnographic, but [Weems’s] use of text displaces, subverts and changes meaning.” Indeed, but while hooks’s elaboration points to how the images are altered by the text, the complex tension described by Weems suggests that the inverse is also true. That is, the

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231 Ibid., 84.
images also have the potential to alter and undermine the claims of the text. In her attention to Weems’s use of text and image, Kimberly Lamm provides a more precise articulation of the dynamic between the two mediums in her summation of their mutual, simultaneous impact on one another: not only does the text “interrupt the security of the visual as an obvious or unacculturated phenomenon,” she posits, but the images in turn “call attention to the imaginaries that accompany particular words, phrases, and narratives.” Concerning *Kitchen Table* in particular, Lamm contends that this dynamic means that neither medium, in and of itself, provides a full or complete portrayal of the black woman protagonist. Rather, each medium “contributes another layer to [the] multivalent portrayal.”

Lamm’s observations are certainly on par with my own read of an active engagement between text and image in Weems’s series. Yet, even as she identifies a rigorous interaction that produces a “multivalent portrayal,” her brief, but close read of the series speaks nothing of the interaction between mediums. Rather, the analysis she offers is based solely on an assessment of some of the images and, as a result, she arrives at a somewhat static and one-dimensional characterization of the black woman figure at the center of the series. Importantly, her argument concerning the series is specifically concerned with Weems’s depiction of black women’s sexuality. More specifically, she

233 Ibid, 128.
234 Ibid, 128-129.
contends that the placement of a nude image of the protagonist within a larger literary and visual narrative works in opposition to the ways in which black women are marked with “telegraphic coding” that objectifies them and denies their sexual agency. Lamm asserts that the image, which presumably depicts the protagonist as she engages in masturbation, represents the woman as having a sense of “honest self-assurance.” Even more significant for Lamm, however: instead of an isolated image, this image is book-ended by other images that depict the black female figure in a way that “informs and supports its connotation of strength.” Thus, Lamm concludes, Weems’s series offers a portrait of the black women figure that works against a reading that would reduce her to “an emblem of sexuality.” More specifically, it places “the nudes’s evocation of sexuality in relation to, rather than repressively distinct from, the portrait’s assertion of presence, honor and strength.”

In comparison to the cursory summations of Kitchen Table offered by Patterson, Sirmans and Delmez, Lamm’s analysis offers a more substantive consideration of the series. Nevertheless, her rather stable, fixed, and categorically “positive” characterization of the protagonist that is based primarily on the images is striking given her articulation of a dynamic, mutually impactful interaction between the texts and images in the series. Her emphasis on this interaction, along with those of Weems and hooks, points to the

235 Ibid. Lamm draws this notion of the “telegraphic coding” through which black women’s bodies are read from Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe.” Here, Spillers’s contends that through language, black women are constructed as the embodiment of the underside against which cultural norms and hierarchies are constituted and defined.
236 Ibid, 129.
237 Ibid.
238 Ibid.
need for further interrogation not only into how a dynamic interaction between the mediums plays out throughout the series, but also, pushing Lamm’s articulation a step further, how this interaction produces more complicated characterizations and depictions of the black woman protagonist at the center of the series.

In my effort to conduct such an interrogation, the work of aesthetic theorist W. J. T. Mitchell, specifically his analysis of what he contends is the “energetic rivalry” between text and image in the illuminated poetry of 18th century Romantic artist William Blake, is particularly useful and instructive.239 Drawing from Mitchell’s observations concerning Blake’s collection poetry and painting pairings, I contend that Weems’s text panels and photographs constitute “two vigorously independent modes of expression” that, in their tension with one another, multiply their independent complexities.240 More specifically, rather than a product that is either primarily visual or primarily verbal, or even a sum of visual-and-verbal parts, text and image multiply by one another through their interaction to produce and reveal something much larger.241 In what follows, I will demonstrate that through its very form—two distinct mediums that stage a generative push-and-pull tension throughout the piece to produce an irreconcilable, complicated, and open-ended depiction of its protagonist—Kitchen Table Series reflects an appositional black aesthetic. That is, in the course of the interaction between the two mediums, the black woman figure and the details of the interiority of her life are brought into view, but

240 Ibid.
in a way that is multidimensional and that refuses prescribed, stable categorizations, such as those premised upon positive/negative representational frames. Through this appositional black aesthetic rendering, *Kitchen Table* provides a way in which to further consider the black religious quest for complex subjectivity. This quest underscores and emphasizes the struggle toward a sense of subjectivity that involves creative, expansive life options and ways of being. According to Pinn, this notion of subjectivity is “complex” in that it resists fixed, imposed notions of identity and, instead, holds in tension “many ontological possibilities and numerous spaces of identification.”

In turning to my delineation of the series, the independent nature of the text panels and the photographic images is made apparent through the way in which neither medium requires the support of the other in order to be intelligible. Moreover, as Mitchell also observes concerning Blake’s collection of poetry and painting, the two mediums constitute two equally compelling art forms, each with a particular aesthetic appeal that vies for the viewer’s primary attention. This type of rivalry between two distinctly captivating art forms is perhaps most immediately established through the layout of

242 To be clear, although Mitchell’s conception of the rigorous interaction between the independent mediums of text and image in Blake’s work grounds my approach to interpreting Weems’s series, the interaction does not in and of itself constitute an appositional black aesthetic. Appositional black aesthetics emerge through the particular depiction of the black woman figure that is produced by way of the text-and-image interaction.


244 Ibid.

245 Ibid.
*Kitchen Table* while in exhibition. The photographs are situated together in clusters or separately as isolated images. Similarly, the text panels in the series appear in pairs or separately as isolated panels located at a measurable distance from the next photograph. While the narrative contained in the text panels reads in a somewhat linear fashion according to the order in which they appear throughout the series, the photographs are displayed in more of a non-linear way, such that they could potentially be viewed in any order. Notably, that the text panels are significantly smaller than the photographs

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246 My observations here are based on viewing *Kitchen Table Series* while in exhibition as part of Weems’s 30-year retrospective, *Carrie Mae Weems: Three Decades of Photography and Video* on view at the Portland Art Museum in Portland, OR in May 2013. I make this observation based on pictures of other exhibitions of *Kitchen Table Series* found on Carrie Mae Weems’s artist website. In these undated exhibitions, the text panels are placed in the same sequential order as the exhibition as the Portland Art Museum, but there is variation in the sequencing of the images. Notably, one of the pictures also depicts a layout that is significantly different from that of the Portland Art Museum: instead of images and texts dispersed between one another as described above, all of the text panels appear together on one wall while all of the images appear together on another wall. However, in published material that contains the series, specifically *Carrie Mae Weems: Three Decades of Photography and Video* and *Carrie Mae Weems: Kitchen Table Series*, the layout and sequencing of the text panels and the images replicate that of the Portland Art Museum exhibition, suggesting that the dispersal of images and text between one another is perhaps the most common layout. See Delmez, ed. *Carrie Mae Weems: Three Decades of Photography and Video*, 76-104 and Damaiani and Matsumoto Editions, *Carrie Mae Weems: Kitchen Table Series* (Bologna, Italy: Damaiani and Matsumoto Editions, 2016). While my analysis of the series here is based on the sequence and layout of the text panels and images at the Portland Art Museum, my point here that the independent relationship between the two mediums is constituted in part by the distinctive viewing experiences between the text panels and the images is still germane; no matter the layout or sequential order, the images remain significantly larger than the text panels and thus necessitate viewing the two mediums from different proximities. Moreover, my overall point concerning the rigorous, counterpoint interaction between the independent mediums of text and image also persists no matter how the series is laid out or the sequential order of images and texts; this point is tied not so much to the layout or the order of the mediums, but to the different claims made by each medium.
results in a kind of back-and-forth dynamic viewing experience as the viewer moves through the exhibition space: the photographs can be viewed from a distance, whereas reading the text panels require that the viewer move forward in order to view and engaged with them through closer proximity.

The dynamic tension between the two mediums signaled by their layout and distinctive aesthetic viewing requisites is made even more apparent in the way the texts and images often directly counterpoint one another in their claims and depictions throughout the work. That is, as I will delineate below, rather than a relationship that is formed through complementary service to one another—with the images serving as illustrations of the text panels or the text panels serving as captions of the images—neither of the mediums requires the support of the other in order to be intelligible. If viewed separately, each would provide a robust account of the black female protagonist. Yet, viewed together, as Mitchell observes about Blake’s poetry and painting, they relate to one another in more of a “syncopated” fashion, such that in their respective claims and depictions, disparities emerge between them that complicate, and in some cases, even resist efforts to equate them.\textsuperscript{248} It is particularly through this syncopation that resists total complementarity that my conception of an appositional black aesthetic emerges in \textit{Kitchen Table}. As noted above, rather than a preoccupation with creating and analyzing images in ways that categorically oppose or critique “negative” images or stereotypes, this aesthetic is premised upon rigorous explorations into the rich nuances, complexities

\textsuperscript{248} Mitchell, 10.
and improvisations that attend black life. It is a way of rendering black people multidimensionally and with an irresolvable openness that exceeds categorical representational frames, norms and social designations. This aesthetic is made apparent in *Kitchen Table* through the multifaceted depiction of the protagonist that is achieved through the counterpointed, syncopated dynamic between text and image.

For instance, one of the text panels describes the woman as she spends time in solitude. There, she contemplates the depths of her being, particularly as a grown woman. The text reads that, “at 38, she was beginning to feel the fullness of her woman self” and wanted to share it with another person who could “deal with the multitude of her being.” The text continues: “But that would have to come later. Presently she was in her solitude, so it wasn’t nobody’s business what she did.” One of the images, however—in fact the nude image in which Lamm makes reference to in her analysis—expounds upon and nuances this textual narrative. In the image, the protagonist sits between the kitchen table and a chair; portions of her nude body are exposed. With her legs open and head tilted back, one arm falls between her legs while she uses her other arm to grab her own hair in a sensual gesture that suggests she is caught up in an act of sexual self-pleasure. As Lamm notes, the bareness of the kitchen and the table—they are without the props that appear in other images, such as wall hangings, playing cards, books, and drinking glasses—places an undeniable focus on the woman’s sexual engagement. Here, in light of the text panels, it is a depiction that suggests that her moments of solitude are not only

249 Lamm, 129.
dedicated to mentally reflecting upon her coming-of-age as a woman and her desire for romantic partnership; it is also a space where she engages in the deeply embodied practice of tending to the “business” of her own erotic gratification. Interpreting the image through its interaction with the text, then, nuances, if not troubles, Lamm’s read of the image. As noted, she interprets this image as a depiction of the protagonist’s “honest self-assurance” in light of her argument that the series is a portrait of “presence, honor and strength.” But rather than a categorical assertion of the protagonist’s character, rather than positing a defined claim, the image divulges the material, corporeal dimensions of the black woman’s interior life.

Similar to this image, all of the images in the series are square-framed tableaus that are set in the interior space of a modest kitchen, specifically the kitchen table. A lamp, similar to one that might be used in an interrogation room, extends down from the top of the frame and highlights the various activities occurring at the table throughout the series. A number of the images capture the woman in what can be presumed to be various relationships that are romantic and amorous in nature with different people. In one image, the woman sits at the kitchen table playing cards with a man; a bottle of whiskey, a carton of cigarettes, and the messy shelled remnants of peanuts are strewn across the table. The pair are deadlocked in flirtatious eye contact that suggests there is something more at stake between them than a mere card game. In another image the woman sits at the table in a negligée. With her head tilted back and her eyes closed, she is seemingly in a moment of tranquil bliss as another woman attentively runs a brush through her hair. The intimate affection between the women is noteworthy as, unlike the fraught tenseness of the images in which she is pictured with men, the protagonist exudes a sense of
unguarded emotional surrender. A triptych of images shows the woman interacting with a third person, a man with whom she is alternately pictured holding him in a possessive embrace, watching him at a distance as he sits at the kitchen table engrossed in a newspaper, and sitting with him at the table with a pensive expression across her face as he looks on, seemingly unmoved.

But while she is pictured with three different people, the text panels make one vague mention of her “infidelity,” but offer no elaboration concerning these multiple relationships. Instead they chronicle the emotional complexities the protagonist experiences while in a monogamous relationship with one particular man. One text panel notes that while she invested “little value” in monogamy given her sense that it is “a system of private property” and felt “secure enough in herself and their love” to allow him to engage in intimate relationships with other people, she was committed to her romantic partner, even if only as a matter of convenience. “Personally,” the text panel reads, “she wasn’t in the mood for exploring new rocky terrain.” A number of text panels go on to further chronicle the particulars of their relationship, including their shared love for “fried fish, greens, blues, jazz and Carmen Jones,” the differences in their personalities that eventually grew into deep fissures in their relationship (he, “an unhardened man of the world” who “liked his coffee in the morning and believed that actions spoke louder than words” and she, a woman who had “been around the block more than once,” was “crazy about her tea at night,” and “loved to run her mouth, to talk things through”), and the eventual demise of their union after their conflicts escalated and he “placed a match-box on her clothes.” At which point, reading this as a sign of impending physical violence against her, she promptly determined “it was time to book.”
The effect of these disparities between text and image in their respective accounts of the protagonist’s romantic involvement is similar to what Mitchell contends is the upshot of Blake’s illuminated poetry. Through this syncopation, there is a “metaphorical richness which multiplies the independent complexities of text and design.” The text in itself contains disparity as it holds in tension the protagonist’s critique of monogamy, particularly her openness to pushing the boundaries of the concept, with details of the intricacies of her exclusive, monogamous relationship. The photographs, then, multiply this complexity with the images of her relationships with different people. This point-counterpoint interaction between the texts and images chronicle the woman as she negotiates her rejection of relationship configurations that reduce her to “private property” while also seeking to cultivate some sense of romantic commitment. Thus, these two independent mediums work together to produce a nuanced, complex account of one woman’s varied approaches to being in meaningful romantic relationship. It is an approach that in some ways reflects and plays into normative relational ideas of monogamy while it also challenges and exceeds such norms and ideas through the images of her affectionate relationships with multiple people. This results in a depiction that defies strict or one-dimensional representational categorization.

Another point in the series where text and image offer syncopated narratives is through the way in which Kitchen Table captures the protagonist as she claims a sense of self-actualization and self-sufficiency while also viscerally coming to terms with an

250 Ibid.
awareness of her own sense of emotional need and desire. One of the text panels narrativizes the woman’s push back against socially constructed gender norms and power dynamics. Taking issue with the ways her romantic partner seeks to control and curtail her forceful personality because, according to the text, “he couldn’t stand the thought of the inevitable shift in the balance of power,” she asserts an understanding of their relationship as “a 50-50 thing. Equals.” Furthermore, she “wasn’t about to succumb to standards of tradition which denied her a rightful place or voice, period.” In the final sentence of the text panel, she abruptly leaves him with two options, “Fish or cut bait.” Here, she is portrayed in this text panel as the epitome of how she is described in yet another text panel: a woman with a “bodacious manner, varied talents, hard laughter, and multiple opinions.” Nevertheless, this characterization is counterpointed in the image “Untitled (Woman and Phone).” Sitting in fetal position, she is photographed in a moment of palpable distress. Among the items on the table, a telephone is situated in the shadow at the opposite end of the kitchen table, signifying the stereotypical narrative trope of “the woman who waits by the phone.” Thus, in remarkable contrast to the self-assured woman in the text panels who takes pride in determining her own fate and is said to understand “self-control” as a fundamental necessity, in the image she is pictured as a woman whose fate is deeply informed by the actions of another. This vulnerability and range of emotion in the protagonist that complicates and nuances her controlled, decisive, and confident characterization in the text is evident in other images, specifically those in which she sits at the table with her friends. In a triptych, she sits at the kitchen table with two women. In one image her eyes are closed and one of her hands covers her mouth as though she is about to weep. One woman stands over her and places a reassuring hand on
her shoulder. The other woman, also seated at the table, leans towards her and places a comforting hand on her arm. Another image captures the women sitting pensively at the table, the protagonist appears to be deep in thought with a cigarette poised in her hands; her friends lean forward, their own thoughtful expressions suggestive of the sense that they, too, are bewildered by whatever issue is at hand. The final image in the triptych breaks the emotional tension evident in the first two images: the women sit at the table sharing a moment of raucous laughter.

The counterpoint tension created between text and image also works to render the dimensions of the protagonist’s ideas and approaches concerning motherhood. If the viewer were only to look at the photographs, they would find images of the protagonist interacting with her daughter at varying degrees of engagement. In one image, she and the child both sit at the kitchen table with mirrors in front of them as they each apply lipstick to their lips. The mirror signifies the mother’s significant influence over her daughter, such that the daughter takes her cues and, indeed, “mirrors” the example set by her mother. In a triptych, one image pictures the daughter watching her mother from a distance as the woman sits at a table reading a book. The child has a forlorn look of longing on her face. The second image pictures mother and daughter seemingly at a stalemate, perhaps in a moment in which the protagonist is administering discipline; the daughter stands against one corner of the table looking somewhat sheepishly at her mother. The protagonist stands against the other side of the table, her arms supporting her as she leans her upper body forward and makes steady, direct eye-contact with the child. The third image is yet another “mirroring” image, but without the mirror props. Here, the protagonist is highly focused on reading and taking notes from a book in front of her
while the child is occupied with writing in a notepad. These images put forth relatively straight-forward depictions of the protagonist as she navigates and engages in the ebbs and flows of motherhood. When multiplied by the text panels, however, a more complicated account of the protagonist’s relationship to motherhood and her daughter emerges. One text panel indicates that her romantic partner wants children; she does not. After they have a child together, the protagonist’s approach to motherhood is compared with that of her sisters. While her sisters are said to “think the world of their children” and take note of every moment that their children “stumbled, teetered and stood,” she had a different kind of engagement with her daughter: “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!!’” The text goes on to read, “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.”

My delineation of the series here demonstrates that when considered through the dynamic interaction between text and images, the work presents a rich depiction of the black woman protagonist as complex, open, and ever-shifting: she is at once at once assertively confident in text and emotionally vulnerable in image, she is committed to a monogamous relationship in text and yet also engages in multiple, possibly concurrent romantic partnerships in image, and she is a figure who, while pictured attending to her daughter in the images, is rather ambivalent toward the idea of motherhood according to the text. Through this depiction, the series demonstrates the nuances and complexities of black interior life that are the central focus of appositional black aesthetics. In so doing, the work gives credence to the contention put forth by Pinn that black religion, conceived
as a quest for complex subjectivity that involves a push for more expansive ways of being, can be seen and considered through black visual art and art-making. More specifically, the back-and-forth, push-and-pull interaction between the claims made by the text panels and those demonstrated in the visual images gives delineation to what it means to live into complex, varying profiles and perspectives that are at the crux of the black religious endeavor. Importantly, however, inasmuch as the appositional black aesthetic at work in *Kitchen Table* reflects Pinn’s idea of black religion, the theoretical assumptions that ground this aesthetic necessitate a critical reconsideration of the conceptual framing of the black religious push for complex, expansive ways of being through the analytic of subjectivity.

### 3.3. Reconceiving Black Religion

In conceptually framing his theory of religion, Pinn argues that the black religious impulse, or push toward more expansive life options and a multiplicity of profiles and perspectives amounts to what he refers to as an “embodied quest for complex subjectivity.” The use of the term “embodied” here is significant, such that the push for more expansive ways of being and fuller life options is a constructive response to the ways in which black bodies have been reduced throughout history to objects with imposed, static ways of being and that are subjected to the dehumanizing control of objectifying forces.\(^{251}\) This dehumanization, violence and control solidified the

\(^{251}\) Pinn, *Terror and Triumph*, 173.
ontological status of black bodies as objects, as less-than-fully-human “nonbeings” alienated from dominant society. Yet, Pinn notes, the imposed status of objecthood upon black people not only secured them within an inferior and alienated place in the social order, it also confers subjectivity and, thus, the status of social dominance onto whites. For example, in considering this paradigm in the context of slavery, he posits that the violence and humiliation meted out by whites onto black bodies during the spectacle of the slave auction block was a repeated ritual that “meant objectification for the enslaved while it symbolized domination and subjectivity for whites.” Thus, the subjectivity of the master was defined in relation to the imposed object status of the African. In this context, black religion involves a continuous wrestling against the dehumanization of black bodies as objects through reconstructing black bodies as subjects with complex, creative identities and a fuller range of ontological possibilities. More specifically, Pinn’s conception of subjectivity here is premised upon “healthy self-concept” and what he refers to as “new consciousness.” Here, he draws from historian of religions Charles Long and posits this consciousness as a struggle back to the “original authenticity,” or the point prior to when black people were signified and constituted as objects. Thus, it is a consciousness that prompts new ways of conceiving “the wholeness of being” beyond objecthood.

252 Ibid, 15.
253 Ibid, 49.
255 Ibid.
Through its concern with art and images that depict black life with a complexity and openness beyond categorical representational frames and prescribed norms and social designations, my conception of an appositional black aesthetic provides a way in which to view black religion as it is rendered in visual art. Yet, the notion of appositionality that underpins this aesthetic presents a challenge to framing these black religious depictions around the analytic of subjectivity. As I delineated in the previous chapter, this project’s conception of appositional black aesthetics is grounded in black critical theorist Fred Moten’s notion that black life inhabits an “undercommon appositionality.”

Fred Moten, “Blackness and Nothingness (Mysticism in the Flesh)” *The Southern Atlantic Quarterly* (Fall 2013): 756.

Moten posits potential and possibility in black alienation from dominant society, or the status of nonbeing or nothingness. Blackness, Moten argues, is appositional, such that it inhabits “a space off to the side or outside-from-the-outside” of civil society. To be appositional is to be “situated nowhere.” It is to embrace an “absolute nothingness” that—distinct from conceptions of the controlled, self-possessed body of bourgeois comportment by which proper subjects of civil society are marked and defined—is characterized by a “fleshly dispossession” that is “without reserve, independent of the desire to show up in and for the conventional optics wherein somebody is delineated and identified.”

The distinction Moten places between appositional fleshly dispossession

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256 Fred Moten, “Blackness and Nothingness (Mysticism in the Flesh)” *The Southern Atlantic Quarterly* (Fall 2013): 756.
257 Ibid.
259 Ibid. See also Moten, “Blackness and Nothingness,” 769.
260 Moten, “Blackness and Nothingness”, 761. Moten’s “fleshly dispossession” is drawn from Hortense Spillers notion of “the flesh,” a conceptualization that signals not only black existence under the conditions of enslavement and its afterlives in the
and the discrete markers of what are Western philosophical conceptions of subjectivity is critical. Moten’s articulation of appositionality is developed in response to the Afropessimist contention, espoused by Frank Wilderson, that in its exteriority to civil society, blackness is “void of subjectivity.”²⁶¹ In this view, according to Moten, the nonbeing, nothingness status of black life is, of necessity, defined and constituted through its relative position to the Western subject.²⁶² In his articulation of appositionality, Moten resolutely eschews a conception of blackness as the “relative nothingness” against which the Western subject is defined and maintains its legitimacy. Blackness, rather, is a generative absolute nothingness that “avoids subjectivity” and its classificatory, regulatory logics and hierarchical distinctions altogether.²⁶³ Blackness, he contends, refuses a categorical standpoint or relative position, such that it is “unmappable within the cosmological grid of the transcendental subject.”²⁶⁴ In its absolute nothingness, its appositional fleshly dispossession, blackness is constituted by a type of fugitive indeterminacy that involves improvisational, disorderly ways of being that exceed, exhaust and render inadequate any effort to be fully calculated, framed or grasped according to dominant social orderings and their prescribed ontologies.²⁶⁵ Whereas contemporary moment, but also the emergence of alternative forms of being and relationality outside of the dominant structures of white supremacist patriarchy. See Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe.” I provide a more thorough delineation of Spillers’s conceptualization in the next section of this chapter.

²⁶² Ibid, 741.
²⁶³ Ibid, 743, 761.
²⁶⁴ Ibid, 740.
²⁶⁵ Ibid, 761. For more on Moten’s notion of fugitivity, see Moten, “The Case of Blackness” Criticism 50 (Spring 2008), 177-218.
Pinn’s notion of complex subjectivity emphasizes an expansiveness that involves “multiple ontological possibilities,” Moten’s theory of appositionality posits that in its refusal of a categorical standpoint, blackness maintains an expansiveness that is prior to the concept of ontology and its classifying and regulating aims; it is “the anoriginal displacement of ontology, it is ontology’s anti- and ante-foundation, ontology’s underground, the irreparable disturbance of ontology’s time and space.” Importantly, for Moten, the appositional, indeterminate, fleshly dispossession that attends blackness is not to be overcome or resisted; it is to be entered into and rigorously explored for its expansive possibility.

Moten’s conception of appositionality proffers a sense of black expansiveness that thus exceeds what black critical theorist Denise Ferreira da Silva identifies as the racialized, regulating classificatory mechanism of subjectivity that reinforces the dominant social order and its hierarchies of power. That is, according to Da Silva’s analysis, subjectivity as an ontological category is itself steeped in logics of colonialism and signification that produce the very racialized hierarchies of power and domination as well as imposed, static ways of being that black religion, according to Pinn’s conception, seeks to subvert. It is a racialized paradigm of classification that is premised upon fixed, imposed designations that dictate who can—and constitutively, who cannot—be recognized as a proper subject, as someone with personhood, as a citizen of civil society. Here, Da Silva argues that subjectivity as a decidedly racialized category emerged in the

266 Ibid, 739.
267 Ibid, 746.
19th century post-Enlightenment colonial project to further establish and maintain the purported ontological distinction and superiority of Europeans in relation to peoples of the rest of the globe.\textsuperscript{268} Important, however, as Da Silva notes, the idea of the European subject and its constitutive “others” had already been developed and established during the period of 17th century colonization wherein modern philosophy sought to define Europe’s particularity over and against other populations.\textsuperscript{269} In this context, the concept of the European “transcendental” subject, defined as fully self-determining, autonomous, and able to reason as well as to know and grasp itself in relation to others, was developed in concert with the idea that non-Europeans were situated outside of the domain of subjectivity, such that they were guided by the whims of irrational instinct and thus required the discipline and domination of European powers.\textsuperscript{270}

But while 17th century modern philosophy could only postulate ontological distinction between European subjects and their constitutive non-European “others,” the 19th century development of the “science of the mind,”—or what da Silva refers to as “the analytics of raciality”—purportedly provided a way in which to “prove” such distinction through race science that posited the body as a signifier of mental and moral capacity.\textsuperscript{271} That is, post-Enlightenment European thinkers defined Europe’s particularity and supremacy over against non-Europeans by arguing that there were two types of

\textsuperscript{269} Ibid, xiii. (Expound upon notion of universal reason and necessitating this definition of particularity)
\textsuperscript{270} Ibid, 31.
\textsuperscript{271} Ibid, 116.
minds which were signified through physical difference: the self-determining, rational mind of the singular, self-possessed European subject who can be known and grasped, or what she refers to as the “transparent I,” and the affectable minds of Europe’s black and colonized global “others.” Da Silva points out that the two types of minds were constructed in a reinforcing relationship of colonial domination. She writes,

[…] the science of the mind produces bodies and social configurations as signifiers—expressions and actualizations, respectively—of two kinds of minds, namely (a) the transparent ‘I’, which emerged in Post-Enlightenment Europe, the kind of mind that is able to know, emulate, and control powers of universal reason, and (b) the affectable ‘I’, the one that emerged in other global regions, the kind of mind subjected to both the exterior determination of the ‘laws of nature’ and the superior force of European minds.

Thus, da Silva argues, subjectivity, or the transparency thesis, is an inherently racialized concept that is always already constructed in relationship to the idea of an inferior, affectable object “other,” namely an indigenous, black or non-European person, who is governed by uncontrollable instinct and exterior forces. In this way, she argues, the very category of the subject is the binary half of a paradigm that, in order to maintain its function and legitimacy, requires peoples who are defined by the category of purportedly affectable object “others.” Notably, da Silva is critical of efforts within black and feminist scholarship that argue for the inclusion of black folks and other oppressed people into the category of the self-determining, universal subject. As with Pinn’s notion

272 Ibid, 116-117.
273 Ibid, 117.
274 Ibid, 154.
of “new consciousness,” which he adopts from Long’s idea of “original authenticity,” such efforts, Da Silva contends, are premised upon the “sociohistorical logics of exclusion.” That is, they suggest the existence of “pre-colonial” black subjects that were expelled from the category of subjecthood and have since been enshrouded and veiled under negative representations through colonialism and racist discourse. The response, then, has been to promote critical strategies that effectively aim to “lift the veil” and “recuperate” black subjecthood, such that black people come to be categorically conceptualized, recognized and represented according to the universal, self-determining, undifferentiated transparent “I”. Yet, as Da Silva contends, critical efforts that seek inclusion into the ontological realm of subjectivity are short sighted; they take for granted how the very idea of subjectivity is grounded in an analytics of raciality wherein the “Transparent I” always signifies whiteness and gains its definition and classificatory significance in the social order through those who are deemed racialized “affectable” others. Thus, subjectivity—along with its constitutive paradigmatic corollary of the affectable object/other—is the product of racialized epistemologies that are part and parcel of a modern strategy of power that grounds and maintains the dominant social order. In other words, the desire for subjectivity and to be recognized as a subject works to reinforce an apparatus of social classification premised upon hierarchies of power.

Although Da Silva’s critique of the “logics of exclusion” is significant for my argument concerning the need to critically rethink the conceptual framing of black religion, it is important to note that in framing black religion as an embodied quest for

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complex subjectivity, Pinn proffers a more fluid, unfixed conception of subjectivity that marks a significant divergence from its colonial and post-Enlightenment era characterizations. In his later work, Pinn further expounds upon his notion of subjectivity, arguing that the subject is not a unified subject, but is fragmented, ever-shifting and never fully captured or defined, making it a kind of moving target.276 Further, he notes, subjectivity is not achieved in one solitary act.277 Rather, his emphasis on “struggle” and “push” points to the ways in which it involves a continuous yearning and push “for more,” or a fuller range of possibilities. Yet, even with his “complex” iteration of subjectivity, one that emphasizes a perpetual struggle toward the category, Pinn’s conception not only reflects what Da Silva delineates as the faulty logics of exclusion, it maintains a largely uncritical embrace of the concept and its function as a classificatory mechanism that orders civil society according to racialized hierarchies of power. Given the theoretical notion of appositionality that grounds the aesthetic proffered by this project, an alternative analytic, one unfettered by subjectivity’s classificatory aims and

276 Pinn, The End of God-Talk: An African American Humanist Theology (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 45-50. Here, Pinn also contends that the subject is associated with the “embodied self,” which he defines as an “aware subject.” That is, the “self as subject” knows and recognizes something of itself and its relation to others, specifically through narrative and action. Narrative refers to the ability to render and account of oneself through speaking, writing, and doing. It is to be recognized as the “who” involved in the narrativizing. In terms of action, Pinn posits that the self as subject is constituted through doing, such that both large and small actions reflect something about the self as subject and its search for meaning.

277 Ibid.
prescribed social orderings, to conceive the black religious endeavor at work in Weems’s series is necessary.\textsuperscript{278}

The case could certainly be made that the complex depiction of the black female figure in \textit{Kitchen Table} amounts to a struggle to no longer be conceived as an object of history, but as a complex subject who is endowed with, as Pinn posits, “all of the privileges and responsibilities associated with those who shape history.”\textsuperscript{279} After all, although she does not theorize the concept, Weems herself makes use of subjectivity to describe her work. For example, the following quotation is one pulled from a conversation in which Weems discussed the use of her own body in her images.

\begin{quote}
It became very important for me as an artist and a woman to take a stand, and use my body as a marker—to be looked at, to be gazed upon, to be evaluated, to be constructed, manipulated, to figure out a space where female character and the black female character in particular could stand in for more than simply herself…it was a way of laying my body on the line: that this body needs to be negotiated. And in one way or another, you have to deal with it, you have to negotiate it, you have to ask the questions about your relationship to this subject, and this subject’s relationship to you, and what is the breadth of that relationship? I think that’s what
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{278} Although it could be argued that my alternative conceptualization of black religion as appositional, excess flesh enactments is another form of subjectivity, my emphasis here is on a push against subjectivity as a particular paradigmatic classificatory system that is premised upon racialized epistemologies and hierarchies of power. (MOTEN: emphasis on blackness as a force; not an ontology; also: to highlight that black folks are still outside of subjectivity and there is life happening beyond this paradigmatic mode of classification) My issue, then, is specifically with subjectivity as it operates as a paradigmatic analytical category and the way in which it, by definition, is constituted by racialized logics and imposed ways of being. In drawing from Fleetwood’s notion of excess flesh enactments to proffer an alternative, I am seeking to describe ways of being that are beyond the particular logics of this classificatory system.

\textsuperscript{279} Pinn, \textit{Terror and Triumph}, 173.
I’m asking my audience to do with me: is to begin to unpack the problematized way in which black female subjectivity has been laid out.\textsuperscript{280}

Here, she notes that her aim in doing so is to ask her audiences to “unpack the problematized way in which black female subjectivity has been laid out.”\textsuperscript{281} In a later interview with \textit{Ebony Magazine}, Weems noted that through these performances she stands in not so much for herself, “but for a black female subjectivity and subject who was thinking and acting according to her own will.”\textsuperscript{282} But while Weems appeals to the notion of subjectivity in her description of her work, this project posits a more capacious and expansive way in which to articulate and conceive of the complex, open and ever-shifting dimensions of the black protagonist depicted in the series. That is, following from Da Silva’s critique, this project espouses a critical view of how the category of subjectivity functions as a racialized paradigm of classification that reinforces imposed


\textsuperscript{281} Ibid.  


social designations and hierarchies of power. Moreover, in view of Moten’s conception of blackness as appositional, indeterminate fleshly dispossession, I contend that the depiction of the protagonist is indicative of something more, something that exceeds the confines of constitutive “standpoint” logics and categorical classification. Thus, while this project takes up Weems’s series, it posits an understanding of her work that pushes beyond the artist’s own articulations by arguing that the rendering in *Kitchen Table* surpasses subjectivity’s paradigmatic limits.

In what follows, I continue my analysis of *Kitchen Table* through a more specific focus on Weems’s performance, particularly in relation to the text panels, and how it offers an alternative analytic through which to conceive of the black religious rendering of the protagonist and her complex, open and ever-shifting way of being. That is, instead of a quest for inclusion in subjectivity’s classificatory paradigmatic frame, the rendering amounts to a generative enactment of the flesh. I draw this articulation in part from visual theorist Nicole R. Fleetwood’s conception of “excess flesh enactments,” which refers to the ways in which black women artists make themselves visible in their work through a particular kind of performative use of their bodies.²⁸³ These enactments, Fleetwood contends, expose not only the regulating “gaze” upon black women’s bodies, but also the limits of the gaze’s totalizing capacity.²⁸⁴ I employ and expound upon this theorization in my attention to *Kitchen Table Series* through my argument that Weems’s performance

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²⁸³ Although Fleetwood makes minor mention of Weems, she focuses on the work of artists Renee Cox, Tracey Rose, and Ayanah Moor along with popular cultural performances by Janet Jackson and Lil’ Kim.

²⁸⁴ Fleetwood, 112.
exposes the limits of the gaze’s capacity to classify black bodies according to subjectivity’s racialized paradigmatic ontological confines. More specifically, informed by Moten’s idea of appositionality that grounds appositional black aesthetics, I contend that Weems’s performance, in which she refracts the gaze back onto the viewer in images that have no explicit textual association in the text panels, symbolically marks the way in which the black female protagonist is neither “subject” nor “object” according to subjectivity’s classificatory frame. Rather than categorically classified within this frame, her complex, open, ever-shifting way of being constitutes what Spillers refers to as “black female flesh ungendered,” an existence that breaches and exceeds feminist visual discourse and the dominant symbolic order of race and gender embedded within it. As such, the black female protagonist is a being that embodies an excessive, fleshly existence that holds a horizon of possibilities.

3.4. Black Religion as Generative Enactments of the Flesh

To elaborate on Weems’s excess flesh enactment as a performative artistic device that opens up an alternative way in which to theoretically conceive of the black religious push for expansive ways of being, I turn back to the independence created between the two mediums of text and image in *Kitchen Table*. Here again, W. J. T. Mitchell’s analysis is useful. He notes that perhaps the most evident way in which independence and tense rivalry is established between text and image is through “the presence of images which do not illustrate,” or, images that have no mention in the text. Without an evident textual equivalent, Mitchell argues, such images should be viewed as existing in the context of other images, rather than as illustrations of words. The images in *Kitchen Table* that go
without explicit textual association work to magnify Weems’s performance and what her bodily enactments offer beyond their counterpoint claims to the textual narrative. Two particular photographs in *Kitchen Table* provide a case in point here. In the photograph “Untitled (Man and Mirror)”, the protagonist is seated at the kitchen table while an unidentifiable man leans seductively over her left shoulder. She looks directly ahead and into the camera lens, presumably at the viewer. Featured prominently among the items on the table is an upright double-sided mirror situated just beneath the woman’s face. In still another image without textual association, “Untitled (Woman standing alone),” the woman is pictured standing at the end of the kitchen table. It is one of the rare images in the series where there are no items placed on the table. The woman leans her body slightly forward and, with her hands placed squarely on the surface of the table, she looks directly into the camera lens. These performances, in which the artist, refracts the viewer’s gaze back onto them, has the effect of doubling visibility: it reveals the visual codes being dispensed onto her visible body through the viewer’s gaze. In other words, not only does Weems make her body visible in the work, but through her performance of gazing back at the viewer, the imposition of the viewer’s gaze also becomes visible. Weems’s performance of double visibility here acknowledges and exposes the ways in which the gaze, the act of looking, has been employed to regulate and classify racialized bodies as the relative negation of whiteness.

Before further delineating this point and its implications through my attention to Weems’s performance in *Kitchen Table*, it is necessary to expound upon the regulating, ________

285 Fleetwood, 112.
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classifying nature of the gaze. Here, I recall my historical treatment of the medium of photography in the previous chapter where I discussed how visual mediums and technologies have been central to the constitution and development of racial difference, racist ideology and to the classifying and disciplining of black bodies according to racial hierarchies of power that define the dominant order. This history reflects the way in which, as Judith Butler asserts, “the visual field is not neutral to the question of race; it is itself a racial formation, an episteme, hegemonic and forceful.”\textsuperscript{286} Indeed, as I explicated, popular cartoons, animated advertisements, anthropometric photographs and other visual mediums were critical to formulating notions of white supremacy, black inferiority and degeneracy, and to measuring and classifying racial bodies along a continuum of “racial types.” Yet, if representations of black people created by visual technologies were a means through which racial difference and racialized systems of classification were formulated and constituted, vision and the act of looking, or the gaze, is integral to ensuring their continued regulating effects.\textsuperscript{287} That is, the gaze maintains systems of racialized power and classification because of the way in which the acts of viewing and looking are deeply embedded with what Frantz Fanon refers to as a “racial epidermal schema.”\textsuperscript{288} In his seminal essay, “The Fact of Blackness,” Fanon famously recalls a


\textsuperscript{287} In addition to Fleetwood, I also draw my understanding of the gaze from Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright discussion of the gaze. See Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright, Practices of Looking: An Introduction to Visual Culture, 2nd Edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

\textsuperscript{288} Frantz Fanon, Black Skin, White Masks, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2008), 91-92.
moment of racist interpellation when a white child, upon seeing Fanon on the street, immediately exclaims, “Maman, look, a Negro; I’m scared...the Negro’s going to eat me!”

This moment is one in which, through the very act of looking, the black body is circumscribed as monstrous and dangerous, prior to making any gesture or movement. The look, then, as Butler notes in her attention to Fanon’s recitation, carries a kind of “performative force,” such that the act of seeing is indissoluble from the acts of attributing or anticipating. Moreover, for Fanon, it is the look, the “white gaze,” that registers and fixes him in place as a Negro, an aberrant object that, importantly, stands in constitutive contradistinction to the white male subject. The Negro man, Fanon points out, is not a “new man,” but a “new type of man, a new species” that is defined through a racialized schema of meanings that whites have “woven out of a thousand details, anecdotes, and stories.”

Yet, while Fanon’s elucidation is one that demonstrates how the gaze regulates and designates black bodies according to racialized classifications that are central to maintaining the dominant social order and its schema of ontological classification, also important for my argument here is the way in which racialized classifications imbedded within the gaze are compounded with logics of gender and sexuality, particularly when the focus of the gaze is black women. More specifically, as Fleetwood puts it, the

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289 Ibid, 93.
290 Judith Butler’s read of Fanon through her work on Rodney King; interpellation.
291 Butler, 20.
292 Fanon, 91, 95.
293 A number of scholars have leveled gender critiques of Fanon for the absence of black women in his analysis. Two critiques in particular are: bell hooks, “Missing Persons: Fantasizing Black Women in Black Skin, White Masks” and Lola Young,
scopic regime is structured not only by racialized schemas, but also gendered and sexual logics that render the black female body as always already a site of excess. That is, black women are viewed and visually represented in dominant visual culture as having or being “too much,” such that they exist outside of the idealized norms of white femininity that are part and parcel of the dominant social order. Performance artist and critic Lorraine O’Grady goes further to point out a constitutive relationship between black women’s excessiveness and white femininity:

The female body in the West is not a unitary sign. Rather, like a coin, it has an obverse and a reverse: on the one side, it is white; on the other, not-white or, prototypically, black. The two bodies cannot be separated, nor can one body be understood in isolation from the other in the West’s metaphoric construction of ‘woman.’ White is what woman is; not-white (and the stereotypes not-white gather in) is what she had better not be. Even in an allegedly postmodern era, the not-white woman as well as the not-white man are symbolically and even theoretically excluded from sexual difference. Their function continues to be to cast the difference of white men and white women into sharper relief.

In a way that demonstrates the role of vision and visual technologies in establishing this constitutive relationship, O’Grady lodges her analysis here in the context of a discussion


294 Fleetwood, 109. Fleetwood refers to vision and visual technologies as the “scopic regime.” She borrows this term from the work of film theorist Christian Metz. Broadly theorized, the term refers to “the use of vision and visual technologies in a given historical and cultural context to maintain power relations.” See Fleetwood, 16-17. For more on Metz’s particular use of the term, see Christian Metz, The Imaginary Signifier: Psychoanalysis and the Cinema, trans. Celia Britton, et. al. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982).


of European artist Édouard Manet’s 1863 portrait entitled, *Olympia*. The frequently studied work—which depicts a black female servant, based on a professional West Indian model named Laura, attending to a nude white woman—is reflective of the ubiquitous figure of the black servant in 19th century European art. This figure, most often barely visible or depicted in the shadows of an image, was widely employed to signal illicit sexuality. In *Olympia* in particular, although Laura is fully dressed and stands in stark contrast against the nudity of the white woman, she signifies and embodies both servitude and sexuality. She is situated along the periphery of the image and at the disposal of the white woman as two extremes-in-one, as both Mammy and Jezebel, as exceptionally unfeminine and disgustingly lustful. As such, the 19th century notion of the “cult true womanhood” and its attendant “virtues” of domesticity, were conceived as not only inapplicable to her, but fundamentally beyond her reach.

297 Ibid. For more on the ways in which 19th century images of the figure of the black servant were employed to signify illicit sexuality, see Sander Gillman, *Difference and Pathology: Stereotypes of Sexuality, Race, and Madness* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1984), 79-83.
298 Ibid.
299 Ibid.
300 In her study in which she deftly links patriarchy, race, and the development of the Western subject, Imani Perry provides historical context to this notion of black women as excess according to dominant gender norms of the 19th century. According to Perry, deeply intertwined within the colonial and racist epistemologies that produced conceptions of the legally recognized Western subject were particular logics surrounding gender and sexuality. That is, widely adopted ideas based in Victorian ideals of domesticity naturalized binary gender categories according to essentialized concepts and rules of behavior that defined what it meant to be a man, the property-owning subject, and to be a woman, his liege, in the context of civil society. These primarily middle-class ideals dictated that women’s sphere of influence was the realm of the private and the domestic. Moreover, women, so defined, were to demonstrate what were considered virtues associated with the “cult of true womanhood”: piety, purity, domesticity and submissiveness. In and up against these gendered logics, colonized and enslaved black
pointedly asserts, “is outside of what can be conceived as woman. She is the chaos that must be excised, and it is her excision that stabilizes the West’s construct of the female body, for the ‘femininity’ of the white female body is ensured by assigning the non-white to a chaos safely removed from sight.”

This way of viewing black women’s bodies as the excessive, object negation of whiteness, specifically white womanhood, would ground public perception of black women throughout the 19th century and into the present moment. As I delineated in the previous chapter, scholars of black visual culture have long chronicled the history of how black women have been the focus of scientific, ethnographic and pornographic looks that render them aberrant and classify them according to stereotypical tropes. Fleetwood points out that these gazes and depictions have conditioned ways of seeing the black female body, particularly those that are publicly visible—here, she highlights not only the exploitive 19th century displays of Sarah Baartman as well as early 20th century popular depictions of Josephine Baker, but also more recent visual perceptions of black women in film, such as Pam Grier, and in sports, including Serena Williams—as an excessive body, outside the idealized norms of white womanhood. It is in this way, she posits, that the visual sphere has in some ways been understood as a “punative field” for black life.

women were constructed not as women, but as “nonpersons,” as the fundamental negation of women. They were said to possess deviant forms of gendering and an “apelike” sexual appetite that could not be disciplined and, thus, demanded absolute domination by the ‘civilized’ and ‘disciplined’ European subjects. See Imani Perry, *Vexy Thing: On Gender and Liberation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 48-49.

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301 Ibid.
302 Fleetwood, 109.
303 Ibid, 13.
That is, it is a “scene of punishment, in which the subjugation of blacks continues through the reproduction of denigrating racial stereotypes that allow whites to define themselves through the process of ‘negative differentiation.’”

As a result of this persistent representation, black women have historically mobilized in resistance. In particular, historian Darlene Clark Hine chronicles how black women have made strategic efforts to resist the dominant, exploitive gaze. Here, Hine bases her analysis on 19th century narratives of enslaved black women that detailed their efforts to resist sexual violence and exploitation as well as organized efforts by women in the black women’s club movement to upend debasing stereotypes of black women at the turn of the 20th century. These strategies were part of what she identifies as a “culture of dissemblance” among black women that was premised upon a politics of silence, secrecy and evasiveness aimed to “protect the sanctity of the inner aspects of their lives.”

Ibid.

Darlene Clark Hine, “Rape and the Inner Lives Black Women in the Middle West: Preliminary Thoughts on the Culture of Dissemblance,” *Signs* 14 (Summer 1989), 915. More specifically, Hine notes that the culture of dissemblance involved black women creating “the appearance of disclosure or openness about themselves and their feelings, while actually remaining an enigma.” Hine draws her articulation of the culture of dissemblance from slave narratives written by black women. According to Hine, rape and sexual vulnerability are considerable themes in many of these narratives. Yet, what is also a key thread is enslaved women’s efforts to resist sexual violence and exploitation and maintain their integrity. Hine points out that although the strategies involved in the culture of dissemblance did not eradicate degrading and stereotypical images of their sexuality, they enabled black women to create alternative images and self-conceptions while shielding themselves from scrutiny. The most institutionalized form of the culture of dissemblance could be found in the Black women’s club movement at the turn of the 20th century. In particular, Hine identifies the efforts of Mary Church Terrell and members of the National Association of Colored Women’s Clubs (NACW). The Association’s core work at the turn of the century was organized around both naming and combatting sexually exploitive stereotypes through downplaying and, in some cases, even denying sexual expression along with the creation of what were considered more positive
Importantly, this involved a type of “self-imposed invisibility,” particularly a shunning of outward exposure and expressions of sexuality in an effort to protect their “bodily integrity and private selves.” Following from Hine’s work, art historian Lisa Gail Collins contends that aspects of the culture of dissemblance have also been at work in the history of black art. Collins argues that this culture is particularly apparent in what she posits as the strident avoidance of nude representations of the black female form in museum art by African American artists throughout the 19th century. In light of the way in which the nude has been a central focus in Western art, Collins notes that, strikingly, there is no images of black women. A significant aspect of this work involved defending black women’s virtue through not only advocacy for legal protection against rapists, but also the creation of boarding houses and training school for girls that provided instruction in respectable comportment and that provided access to dignified work as domestics. For more on the culture of dissemblance as well as the efforts of the black women’s club movement in this regard, see Collins, “Economies of the Flesh,” Evelyn Hammonds, “Black (W)holes and the Geometry of Black Female Sexuality,” *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 6 (1994), 127-145 and “Toward a Genealogy of Black Female Sexuality: The Problematic of Silence,” in Jacqui Alexander and Chandra Talpade, eds. *Feminist Genealogies, Colonial Legacies, Democratic Futures* (New York: Routledge, 1997), Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women’s Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 1994).


307 Ibid, 100. Collins makes her observations based on her study of The Image of the Black in Western Art Research Project and Photo Archive at Harvard University, launched by John and Dominique de Menil. The archive spans over 5,000 years and contains over 25,000 images of black people. Portions of its holdings have been published in a five-volume series. See David Bindman and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. *The Image of the Black in Western Art, Volumes I-V* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2010). Collins also draws from art historian Judith Wilson’s historical account of representations of the black female nude by black artists in “Getting Down to Get Over: Romare Bearden’s Use of Pornography and the Problem of the Black Female Body in Afro-U.S. Art” in Gina Dent, ed. *Black Popular Culture* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1992), 112-122.
record of any black female nudes created by an African American artist during the entire 19th century.\textsuperscript{308} It would not be until during the 20th century that black artists would begin take on the black female nude as a focus in their artwork.\textsuperscript{309} The reticence around this rendering by black artists, Collins surmises, speaks to a larger black cultural awareness of the ways in which representations of the black female form are vulnerable to and overburdened by tensions of race, gender and sexuality that structure the exploitative, classifying gaze.\textsuperscript{310}

In *Kitchen Table Series*, Weems does not avoid the gaze or shield the black woman figure and her interior life—her expressions of sexuality, her intimate relationships—from outward exposure. Rather, in a way that reflects Fleetwood’s notion of excess flesh enactments, she performatively foregrounds her own body as a means of bringing the black female figure into view. Moreover, through her look back at the viewer in the aforementioned images, she demonstrates what Fleetwood identifies as the productive possibility in these performances: the figure becomes a troubling presence to the very scopic regime that marks and defines her as troubling.\textsuperscript{311} That is, her look back at the viewer symbolically acknowledges and exposes the dominant gaze and the

\textsuperscript{308} Ibid, 100-101.

\textsuperscript{309} Ibid. Wilson notes that some of the first depictions of the black female nude by black artists were those by Harlem Renaissance artists, including Archibald Motley Brown’s *Brown Girl After the Bath* (1931) as well as paintings and sculptures by William H. Johnson and Fracisco Lord. She also points out sculptural work by Augusta Savage and work by Eldzier Cortor’s *Southern Gate* (1942) and *Room No. 6* (1948). See Wilson, 114-116.

\textsuperscript{310} Ibid, 100.

\textsuperscript{311} Fleetwood, 18.
imposition of its regulating visual codes. However, as Fleetwood notes, excess flesh enactments are not a wholesale resistance or refusal of the gaze. In *Kitchen Table*, in particular, with exception of these two images wherein the protagonist looks directly into the camera lens, viewers can largely maintain a relatively unself-conscious viewing experience throughout the series. Rather than complete eschewal, her performances of “looking back” in these two images instead signals the limits of the gaze’s purported totalizing capacity. This is significant as it is here, I contend, that Weems’s performance offers a noteworthy rejoinder to Fanon’s racial primal scene. As noted, for Fanon, it is through the white gaze and its embedded racial schema that his classificatory status as a Negro, as the inferior negation of whiteness, is solidified. The gaze is such that it renders him without recourse; he is “overdetermined from without” and “sealed into

312 Ibid, 112, 118.
313 Ibid, 111-112.
314 Ibid, 17-18,112-113. By the “totalizing capacity” attributed to the gaze, Fleetwood refers to the ways in which, within black cultural studies discourse concerning race and visual culture, black people are often situated as having “no recourse in which to challenge scopic regimes.” She makes reference specifically to Lindon Barrett’s work in *Blackness and Value: Seeing Double* where he contends that diasporic populations are under circumstances in which the “sense-making capacity of vision” is monopolized in a hostile way, such that it is used to pejoratively define them and reinforce the social, political and economic oppression they face. In lieu of visual forms where black people are “disbarrered from meaningful participation,” Barrett emphasizes the sphere of the sonic as a significant space for black expression and claims to full humanity. While Fleetwood agrees with Barrett’s summation of the subjugation of black bodies through vision and visual technologies, she argues for the way in which black artists “seize the scopic regime” and its construction and expectation of black aberration as a form of redress, thus complicating discourses and projects that frame black people as only ever victims of the “mastering gaze.” I follow from Fleetwood’s analysis and conceptualization by focusing specifically on the way in which Weems’s series troubles the gaze’s “totalizing” capacity to thoroughly define blacks as the reducible, “other” object negation of whiteness according to subjectivity’s paradigmatic frame.
crushing objecthood.”\textsuperscript{315} However, Weems’s performative look back at the gaze—in which she situates her protagonist not as its passive recipient, but as its active contender—constitutes a line of flight, a momentary “glitch” in the visual field that short-circuits the gaze’s overdetermining aims and signals an existence that is beyond its regulatory reach. Importantly, the look back is not so much a bid to rescue her black female body from its relegation to the excessive outer limits of womanhood; it does not signify a paradigmatic move from “object to subject” according to subjectivity’s classificatory hierarchy of power. Rather, in analyzing these images through an appositional black aesthetic that is premised upon Moten’s notion of indeterminate, fleshly dispossession that exceeds prescribed calculation and categorization, I contend that the look locates a generative, \textit{irreducible} black female excessiveness that is always already more than the prescriptive social construct of white womanhood or its corollary, reducible object negation. That is, even as the gaze dispenses its insidious, regulatory classification and subjection, it can never fully capture or exhaust the boundless plenitude of her existence. Thus, following from Moten, instead of an excessiveness that is the relative object negation through which white womanhood defines itself, this performance registers an absolute black female excessiveness that cannot be completely grasped or framed according to the logics of the dominant social order and its attending ontological categories. I conceive her look back as akin to what Da Silva, in a nod to Moten, posits as an “appositional encounter” with the excessive, desiring female body

\textsuperscript{315} Fanon, 87, 121.
that is neither the subject of the “transparent I” or its object others. She embodies what post-Enlightenment ontological formulations cannot account for: the unrepresentable, unregulated “Thing” that mediates between the transparent subject and the object. For Da Silva, the figure of the disavowed colonial native/enslaved female body is an apt referent to the “Thingly” figure here because in modern ways of knowing, this body remains “the most prolific signifier of excess,” such that “there is no place to which it is assigned in the ethico-political self-accounts inscribed in juridico-economic architectures.” In its excessiveness, this figure hosts a “horizon of possibilities” and “brings measurement (and other producers of value, such as calculation and classification) into crisis.”

The contemporaneous discourse that formed the intellectual context out of which Kitchen Table was created, along with Spillers’s notion of “female flesh ungendered,” provide useful points of reference in which to further elaborate upon this notion of a generative, irreducible black female excessiveness that exceeds the ontological confines of the dominant social order as depicted in the series. Weems has noted that she produced the series in the aftermath of Laura Mulvey’s 1975 pathbreaking feminist treatise on film theory entitled, “Visual Pleasures and Narrative Cinema,” a publication that would precipitate much critical discourse among feminist artists as well as film and art critics concerning the politics of representing the female form in the late 1970s and 1980s. In

316 Da Silva, “To Be Announced,” 54, 58.
317 Ibid, 50.
318 Ibid, 49.
319 Ibid, 58.
her analysis of narrative film using psychoanalytic theory, Mulvey contends that the cinematic genre is constructed in a way that reflects a patriarchal unconscious, such that the male protagonists in film are the active bearers of the look while women in films are the passive, sexualized objects of their gaze.\textsuperscript{320} Thus when women appear on the screen, they are immediately viewed through an objectifying patriarchal gaze by male spectators who project their look onto their screen surrogate, the main male protagonist.\textsuperscript{321} Mulvey was not alone in her articulation and critique. Her work, along with that of other American and British feminist art critics and historians, such as Griselda Pollock, Mary

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\textsuperscript{320} Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” Screen 16.3 (Autumn 1975): 6-7. More specifically, in delineating this argument, Mulvey employs the Freudian psychoanalytic notion that within the patriarchal unconscious, women are conceived as the castrated male “other.” In other words, women signify gender difference in and through their lack of a penis; it is upon this lack that the existence of the phallocentric patriarchal order, or “law of the Father,” depends. Mulvey writes that “the paradox of phallocentrism in all its manifestations is that it depends on the image of the castrated woman to give order and meaning to its world. An idea of woman stands as lynch pin to the system: it is her lack that produces the phallus as a symbolic presence, it is her desire to make good the lack that the phallus signifies.” For Mulvey, the psychoanalytic notion of the castrated woman has critical implications for understanding how patriarchy is at play in narrative cinema. When a woman appears on the screen, though she is displayed for the pleasure and enjoyment of men, she at the same time evokes for the male spectator the threat of castration and, thus, unpleasure. To escape or circumvent castration anxiety, the male unconscious adopts one of two different types of objectifying gazes when confronted with the female form in narrative cinema: voyeurism and what Mulvey refers to as fetishistic scopophilia, or the effort to tame the image of the woman by making it an object of reassurance or satisfaction.

\textsuperscript{321} Ibid. Mulvey points out that this type of patriarchal pleasure is not limited to the medium of narrative film. It can also apply to other visual forms, such as visual art and photography. Her concern here, however, is with the way in which women’s “to-be-looked-at-ness” is built into narrative cinema’s form. That is, through its control of both the dimension of time (editing and narrative flow) and the dimensions of space (editing, changes in distance), narrative film is imbedded with cinematic codes that, according to Mulvey, “create a gaze, a world, and an object, thereby producing an illusion cut to the measure of desire.”

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Kelly, and Lucy Lippard, contributed to what theorist and art historian Amelia Jones identifies as a general antipathy toward the use of the body in art that swept the 1980s. This antipathy among feminist art critics involved a particular condemnation of performance art, or art that takes place through the enactment of the artist’s body. Given the inescapable objectification of the female form by the patriarchal male gaze, feminist art critics vehemently contended that there was an absolute need to remove the female body from any form of presentation or representation. Following from Mulvey’s treatise, Kelly, who wrote what would be lauded as a seminal feminist critique of performance art in her essay “Re-Viewing Modernist Critique,” asserted that the female form is continuously read through dominant, essentialist ideas of femininity premised upon a phallocentric, patriarchal order that ties femininity to essential biological difference. Until these modes of viewing can be disrupted, she asserted, a turn away from the body and performance art is necessary.


323 Ibid. Academic discourse in the field of performance art has historically placed an emphasis on embodied movement in the context of live performances. Nevertheless, this project follows Jones’s conception of performance art, or what she refers to as “body art,” as constituted by an artist’s use of his/her own body in an art piece, be that a live performance, film or still photography. (Elaborate upon Jones’s preference for the term “body art” over against “performance art”)


325 Ibid. Kelly articulated this particular assertion in “No Essential Femininity: A Conversation between Mary Kelly and Paul Smith” Parachute 37 (Spring 1982), 31-35. In her consideration of Kelly’s assertions here, Jones points out that Kelly’s reference to “distancing devices” reflects the way in which Bertolt Brecht’s theory of “distanciation” was adopted by British feminist artists and art critics. According to Jones, based on
Strikingly, neither cinematic and visual representations of black women or questions of race figure into this discourse. While Kelly simply makes no mention of how race plays into constructions of femininity, Mulvey’s survey of mostly mid-20th century era narrative films in which she bases her argument is limited to the gaze upon white women in all-white casts, including, Marilyn Monroe in River of No Return (1954), Grace Kelly in Rear Window (1954), Kim Novak in Vertigo (1958) and Tippi Hedren in Marni (1964). One wonders how her analysis of the gaze might have shifted had she also considered black women actresses in leading roles during the same time period, including Dorothy Dandridge’s performance in Carmen Jones (1954), Diahann Carroll in Porgy and Bess (1959), Pearl Bailey in both Carmen Jones and Porgy and Bess, and Ruby Dee in A Raisin in the Sun (1961). Certainly, the notion of an objectifying gaze would maintain its pertinence. However, the gaze upon black women figures is such that it is constituted by an effort to regulate difference as it emerges in a complex entanglement of both gender and race. For Mulvey to expand her analysis of an objectifying gaze to include black women would thus necessitate a reckoning with a gaze in which white women can most assuredly be complicit. Yet, as bell hooks has pointed out in her response to Mulvey, the absence of black women in these theorizations alone is glaring; it reflects a feminist discourse that “actively suppresses recognition of race, reenacting and mirroring the erasure of black womanhood that occurs in films, silencing any discussion

Brecht’s conception, Kelly and other feminist art and art critics argued for a radical feminist art practice that aimed to “displace and provoke the spectator, making her or him aware of the process of experiencing the text and precluding the spectator’s identification with the illusionary and ideological functions of representations.”
of racial difference—of racialized sexual difference.” hooks goes on to aptly note, “despite feminist critical interventions aimed at deconstructing the category ‘woman’ which highlight the significance of race, many feminist film critics continue to structure their discourse as though it speaks about ‘women’ when in actuality it speaks only about white women.”

*Kitchen Table* symbolizes the absence of black women from this discourse. Here, I reemphasize the way in which the independence of the mediums of text and image is created through the presence of images that are not described or counterpointed by the text, specifically the aforementioned images in which Weems engages in a performative look back at the viewer. These images that go without textual association, I contend, visually signify Spillers’s contention that black women are an “unarticulated nuance” in white feminist discourse. Black women’s gendering, she further contends, has been “a tale writ between the lines and not-quite-spaces of American domesticity” and the prevailing dominant symbolic order that reserves the category of woman for white women. Through her notion of “female flesh ungendered,” the foundational conceptualization from which Fleetwood’s articulation of excess flesh enactments draws its intellectual lineage, Spillers historicizes and, importantly, locates possibility in the

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327 Ibid.
ways in which black life always already unsettles the coherence of normative conceptions of gender.\textsuperscript{329}

According to Spillers, among enslaved men and women, the violence of slavery exploded dominant gender constructions, particularly the strict differentiation between masculinity and femininity, that attended civil society.\textsuperscript{330} As I noted in my attention to Spillers in the previous chapter, this involved a process of “ungendering” wherein domestic life and its accompanying nuclear kinship arrangements, organized according to the “prevailing social fiction” of the line and law of the patriarchal father, were effectively denied.\textsuperscript{331} What’s more, violent brutality was meted out equally and similarly upon enslaved men and women in ways that blurred strict demarcations between male and female genders.

Important for Spillers’s theorization is her contention that what registered the wounding of this violence is what she refers to as “the flesh.” Concerning the violent experiences of the enslaved woman, she writes,

she is not only the target of rape—in one sense, an interiorized violation of body and mind—but also the topic of specifically externalized acts of torture and prostration that we imagine as the peculiar province of male brutality and torture inflicted by other males. A female body strung from a tree limb, or bleeding from the breast on any given day of field work because the ‘overseer,’ standing the length of a whip, has popped her flesh

\textsuperscript{329} This articulation of black life as always already “unsettling” normative notions of gender is drawn from Zakiyyah Iman Jackson, “Waking Nightmares” \textit{GLQ} 17 (2011), 358-363. Here, Jackson makes the case that given the ways in which blackness is associated with “essential deviance” that places out of gender norms and constructions, blackness is fundamentally queer.
\textsuperscript{330} Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe,” 68, 72.
\textsuperscript{331} Ibid, 80.
open, adds lexical and living dimension to the narratives of women in culture and society.\textsuperscript{332}

For Spillers, this brutalization is a “materialized scene of unprotected female flesh—of female flesh ungendered.” Here, she makes a distinction between the flesh and the body: the body marks and introduces categorical distinction; its parameters can be calculated, measured and categorized according to the discursive norms and constructs by which one is made intelligible and deemed viable. However, the flesh of the captives, those who “had an absence of subject position,” precedes the body; it is that “zero degree of conceptualization” that is “not at all gender-related, gender specific.”\textsuperscript{333} As Ashon Crawley notes in his delineation of Spillers’s conceptualization, the flesh “stands forth unbounded, discontinuous, open and vulnerable.”\textsuperscript{334} In its illegibility in and up against the patriarchal, gendered modes that define dominant society and its subjects, this theorization of the black female flesh ungendered provides a more precise analytic through which to constructively articulate and elaborate upon Weems’s rendering of black women’s excessiveness. Situated “outside the traditional symbolics of female gender,” the excessive black female flesh marks an existence under the violent conditions of slavery and its afterlives, but, importantly for Spillers, it is not reducible to such violence.\textsuperscript{335} That is, the excessive black female flesh is a generative way of engaging in the world; it is a way of being that is “less interested in joining the ranks of patriarchal

\textsuperscript{332} Ibid, 68.
\textsuperscript{333} Ibid, 67.
\textsuperscript{334} Ashon Crawley, \textit{Blackpentecostal Breath}, 59.
\textsuperscript{335} Spillers, 80.
gendered femaleness.” Rather it signals potential in maintaining a type of “insurgent ground,” that involves what Alexander Weheliye, in his attention to Spillers’s theorization of the flesh, refers to as “forms of practices, existences, thoughts, desires, dreams and sounds [that] contemporaneously persist in the law’s spectral shadows.”

In the context of a discourse that proffers analyses that assume this symbolic order, *Kitchen Table* makes a sharp interjection with a black woman figure who stands in the flesh, representing what Spillers describes as a type of disruptive chaos wherein “language ceases to speak” and “the discourse runs out of terms.” In its illegibility according to the dominant discourse, this excessive, fleshy existence is rich with possibility. While the protagonist is described by the text up to a certain point in the series, by withholding any textual association for some of the images, her narrative and full identity is ultimately left open and incomplete, and thus not fully knowable, graspable, or readily categorical. This enactment of the flesh, then, constitutes an alternative way in which to conceive of the black religious push for fuller, more expansive ways of being. That is, she circumvents any effort by the viewer to regulate her

336 Ibid, 68, 80. I understand Spillers conception of female flesh ungendered as a way of engaging the world based on her articulation that it “offers a praxis and a theory, a text for living and for dying, and a method for reading both through their diverse mediations.”
338 Ibid, 165.
339 Although I contend in the first section that neither text or image predominate in *Kitchen Table Series*, I conclude here with an emphasis on the images. Here, while I maintain my view that neither medium predominates, I do contend that given the non-linear way in which the images appear, as opposed to the more linear narrative of the text, the images offer more of an open-ended rendering of the protagonist that goes beyond the descriptions in the text.
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according to overdetermined, hard-and-fast social orderings and, instead, through her ambiguity, she maintains a capacity to hold in tension any number of identities and a range of ever-shifting profiles and perspectives. From this appositional existence that is in excess of dominant classificatory paradigms and overdetermined categories, she can, as Spillers opines, “rewrite after all a radically different text for a female empowerment.”

3.5. Conclusion

In this chapter, I continued my explication of appositional black aesthetics and black religion through an analysis of Weems’s *Kitchen Table Series*. In particular, I contend that appositional black aesthetics are reflected in the dynamic interaction between text, image and performance that depicts the black female figure and her interior life as complex, open and ever-shifting. This depiction that is produced through my proposed aesthetic provides visual delineation of the push for more expansive ways of being and a multiplicity of profiles and perspectives that is central to black religion. And yet, Moten’s conception of appositionality that grounds appositional black aesthetics, necessitates a more expansive analytic through which to conceive of the black religious endeavor beyond subjectivity’s racialized paradigm of categorical classification and hierarchies of power. I contend that Weems’s performance in relation to the text panels in the series offers an alternative conception through its depiction of Nicole Fleetwood’s

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notion of excess flesh enactments. Through this performance, the protagonist demonstrates a way of being that is akin to Spillers’s theorization of black female flesh ungendered. By way of this reading of Weems’s images, this chapter posits the black religious push for fuller, expansive ways of being as a generative enactment of the flesh. In this theoretical conceptualization, black religion becomes the locus point of possibility for ways of being that exceed and render inadequate any effort to be fully calculated or grasped according to the regulating social logics of dominant society and its prescribed ontologies.
Chapter 4

Taking Up Space: Performances of Black Religion In and Beyond Edifices of Power

4.1. Introduction

In 2005, artist Carrie Mae Weems traveled to Rome as a recipient of the American Academy in Rome’s prestigious Rome Prize. As she worked throughout the city over the course of her residency year, her presence there, particularly as a black artist, was met with remarkable incredulity on the part of colleagues and acquaintances alike.

Carrie Mae, what are you doing here?

The question, asked so often of the artist that it became too numerous to count, could potentially be understood as an earnest and well-intentioned one if it were not for its underlying premise: in Europe, Weems was evidently “out of place”; she was outside the territory designated for black artists. In recalling her experience with these repeated
inquiries in a lecture for the Frist Center for Visual Arts, Weems elaborated on the question’s troubling inference, wryly noting, “as a black artist, maybe I could be in the South or I could be some place [else]. But my black ass was not supposed to be runnin’ up and down the streets of Rome on a regular basis.” One of the series of images Weems created during her time in the city, aptly entitled *Roaming* (2006), offers something of a meditation and a rejoinder, and not only to the implicit assumptions concerning where black artists belong and do not belong; it also confronts the broader issues that such assumptions signify and are part and parcel, namely the convergence of race, space, structures of power and logics of the modern social order. In her study and conceptualization of “black women’s geographies,” Katherine McKittrick speaks to this convergence in her contention that power and domination are “visible spatial projects that organize, name, and see social differences (such as black femininity) and determine where social order happens.” In other words, contrary to the common notion that space is pre-existing and objectively “just is,” particular social practices, logics and ideologies of power create and are embedded within landscapes and the built environment as well as contribute to how we organize and imagine our surroundings. Thus, as McKittrick posits, the dominant social order and its attendant racialized and gendered hierarchies of distinction become naturalized through the spatialization of difference, such that “economic, ideological, social and political processes position the racial-sexual body

343 Ibid, xv.
within what seem like predetermined, or appropriate, places and assume that this arrangement is commonsensical.”

In this chapter, I continue my explication of black religion as enactments of the flesh by interrogating these spatial dynamics as they are depicted in *Roaming*. I focus specifically on Weems’s performance in which she stands between and up against structurally imposing edifices of Italian Rationalist architecture in the city of Rome. In particular, Weems embodies a black female figure who stands in stark diminutive contrast to monumental edifices that, I argue, represent the way in which the racialized paradigm of subjectivity is a spatialized project. To ground this argument, I first situate Weems among other black women performance artists who use their own bodies in their work to interrogate and challenge notions of power and domination as they are evoked through architectural edifices and landscapes. In the second section, I turn to architectural theory to make the case that at work in subjectivity as an analytical category are logics of spatialization that are reflected in 18th century foundational features of rationalist architectural design and its emphasis on simplicity over ornamentation, symmetry and geometric form. These spatial logics of subjectivity conceive of the European subject as maintaining an ordered, coherent interiority that distinctly contrasts with the purportedly chaotic, uncontrollable exteriority of black and colonized populations. Weems’s performative positioning of her black female body against Italian Rationalist structures that reflect 18th century foundational features of rationalism, specifically the Palazzo dei

344 Ibid.
Congressi and the Palazzo della Civiltà Italiana, demonstrates these spatialized logics. More specifically, her body is suggestive of the purportedly “ungeographic” black exteriority against which the coherent interiority European subject is defined and legitimized. In the third and final section, I contend that even as the black female figure is suggestive of the black exteriority and displacement against which the interior subject is spatially defined, she at the same time embodies geographic potential and possibility. Here, I focus on how the figure is consistently pictured with her back to the camera lens in the images. Through this posture, she refuses complete intelligibility of her likeness and thus performs what Daphne Brooks refers to as “spectacular opacity.” That is, she contests full transparency and eschews forms of recognition that are relative to the modes of spatial classification imposed by the structures around her. This contestation constitutes a generative enactment of the flesh that defines and animates the black religious push for meaning and fuller, expansive ways of being. As noted in the previous chapter, this conceptualization posits black religion as the locus point of possibility for complex, open, ever-shifting ways of being that always already exceed the regulating social and, in this case, spatial logics of dominant society and its prescribed ontologies.

Weems demonstrates an enactment of the flesh that upends the spatialized logics of subjectivity in *Roaming*. The black female figure neither aspires toward inclusion within the structures that represent the spatial logics of the European subject, nor can she be fully read and classified according to constitutive notions of the subject’s exterior

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other. By reading her stance through my conception of appositional black aesthetics and its concerns with depictions of black life that extend beyond prescribed norms, social logics and designations, I contend that rather than remain in place according to subjectivity’s spatial logics, the black female figure instead takes up space and points toward what McKittrick identifies as “black geographies” that signal alternative ways of knowing and writing the social and spatial world that always already exist alongside and across structures and terrains of domination.346

4.2. Black Performance and Edifices of Power

_ Roaming_ marks another piece in Carrie Mae Weems’s oeuvre in which the artist’s body is the focus of her camera lens. This performative element, which she first started to incorporate while working on _Kitchen Table Series_, would become somewhat of a fixture in her art work by 2006.347 In contrast to her portrayal of the protagonist in _Kitchen Table_, however, the figure that appears in _Roaming_ and in other subsequent work maintains a pared down, austere presence.348 Dressed in a long black gown, she is

346 McKittrick, xiv.
347 Weems attributes her initial performance in _Kitchen Table Series_ to her relative isolation while creating the piece during the winter in Syracuse, New York. Unable to find potential black women sitters, she decided to use herself as a stand-in. She has subsequently expressed a general preference for using herself as the focus of her camera lens over turning the camera toward other people.
348 After _Kitchen Table Series_, performance figures prominently in Weems’s subsequent works, including _Not Manet’s Type_ (1997), _Dreaming in Cuba_ (2001), and _The Louisiana Project_ (2003). Weems’s particular performance of the black woman figure in the black gown with her back to the camera also appears in _Beacon_ (2005), _Museum Series_ (2006), and _Scenes & Take_ (2016).
repetitively depicted with her back turned from the camera lens. This creates a viewing experience whereby the viewer is led into the photographic frame by the figure. In the black-and-white images in *Roaming* in particular, her lone, dark form stands out in blunt contrast to the grey-tone of the architectural structures and landscapes that fill the frame. For Weems, the figure is “more than one thing”; it represents not so much the artist herself, but her “muse or alter-ego” that serves as both a witness and a guide into the traumas of history, into “circumstances seldom seen.”\(^{349}\) This type of performative engagement is indicative of what Uri McMillan identifies as a common aesthetic practice among black women performance artists that he refers to as “avatar production.”\(^ {350}\) This practice involves performances of alterity through the creation and inhabitation of alternative beings that are akin to a “second self.”\(^ {351}\) According to McMillan, embodying an avatar is more than role-play or mimesis; through these performances, black women assert a claim to social space as well as highlight and stretch the boundaries of the subordinate social roles through which black women are typically defined.\(^ {352}\) That is, the categorical assumptions associated with black women are morphed “from that which confines or constricts to sites in which new possibilities for human agency might be explored.”\(^ {353}\)


\(^{351}\) Ibid, 12.

\(^{352}\) Ibid.

\(^{353}\) Ibid. Also at work in avatar performances, McMillan notes, is both a disruption to linear notions of time and to singular, undifferentiated notions of the self. Time is
McMillan traces a genealogy of this performative practice among black women that dates back to the 19th century and continues into the 21st century, including the performances of passing by Ellen Craft, a former enslaved woman whose aesthetic maneuvers involved in her embodiment of a disabled white male avatar succeeded in securing her freedom along with that of her husband and led to subsequent stagings in London as well as Howardina Pindell’s contemporary video art piece entitled *Free, White and 21* (1980) in which she created a “black feminist counterpublic” by staging a dialogue between reincarnations of herself and a caricature of a white feminist. By tracing this genealogy of black women’s avatar production, McMillan makes a number of interventions into the discourse on performance art, perhaps most primary among them being a corrective to what he refers to as the “Eurocentric narrativization of performance art” that omits the presence of black performers as historical contributors to the practice. In contrast to the standard narrative that tracks the origins of performance art back to the early 20th century Futurist, Dadaist and Surrealist avant-garde movements in Europe, McMillan not only extends this history further back to 19th century black historical actors, but in so doing, he also expands the aims and strategies of performance art. That is, while early 20th century European avant-gardists employed performance depicted as “poloytemporal” in that distinctions between past and present are blurred; what has come before is projected as continually erupting onto the present. Avatars are porous beings that maintain a sense of ambiguity and elastic multiplicity as both real persons and theatrical representations, thus suggesting a “hazy merger” between notions of self and other.

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355 Ibid, 3.
356 Ibid. Although McMillan does not specify particular pieces of scholarship that reflect this standard narrative, he does make tangential reference to RoseLee Goldberg,
art as a means to subvert the dominance of painting as an artistic medium and to enliven art in ways that directly engage audiences, black women’s genealogies of performance reflect similar ends, but, importantly, with the additional and more specific aims to challenge the circumscriptions around how black female bodies move and are conceived in public spaces and to reconstitute alternative conceptions through acts of self-exhibition and even, as McMillan puts it, “dangerous subterfuge.” Black women’s performance art thus reflects what Tavia Nyong’o identifies as the potential and possibility in black performance art more generally. In his ruminations concerning the political import of black performance art, he posits that embodied performances are indicative of the ways in which “art can unsettle the edifices of domination.”

That is, by staging the particular


Importantly, McMillan is not the only scholar who dates performance art back to 19th century through attention to black performative practices. Daphne Brooks charts a similar trajectory in *Bodies in Dissent* where she traces what she contends is a heterogeneous black popular performance tradition dating back to a decade before the Civil War. Her study includes 19th century figures such as Henry Box Brown, who escaped slavery by mailing himself in a crate from Virginia to Philadelphia. Brown’s method of escape informed his creation of visual exhibition that protested slavery. See Brooks, *Bodies in Dissent*, 66-130. Valerie Cassel Oliver includes a brief discussion of the black presence in early 20th century European avant-garde movement, specifically performance artist Benjamin Patterson and his work with Fluxus in the 1950s. See Valerie Cassel Oliver, ed. *Radical Presences: Black Performance in Contemporary Art* (Houston: Contemporary Arts Museum Houston, 2013).

conditions and routinized scenarios that confront black people, black performance art works “to undermine the mechanics through which such domination is reproduced and to dare us to imagine and to act otherwise.” Nyong’o’s articulation of the challenge art and, more specifically, black performance art can pose to “edifices” of domination and power is particularly fitting in light of Weems’s performance in Roaming. Although Nyong’o’s articulation may have been a rhetorical one, I contend in my delineation below that Roaming depicts how logics of Western power and domination are indeed produced and reinforced through material and physical objects and geographic space. That is, Western spatial logics of subjectivity are evoked through the design of the Italian Rationalist architecture that figures prominently in the series.

Before delving into an analysis of this depiction in Roaming, however, it must be acknowledged that Weems is not the only black woman performance artist who attends to the entanglements between power, domination and built and landscape environments. In particular, Nona Faustine’s 2015 piece entitled White Shoes engages these themes and bears striking aesthetic similarities with Weems’s Roaming. In her series of 10 photographs, Faustine appears nude, wearing only a pair of glistening white pumps on her feet. Throughout the series, she is pictured standing against institutional structures and natural landscapes; her exposed, vulnerable body brings the hidden histories of

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\[\text{358 Ibid, 29.}
\[\text{359 Faustine has noted that Weems’s photographic work, among work by other black artists, was a key inspiration for her own. See Quiana Mestrich, “Photographer Interview: Nona Faustine,” Dodge and Burn: Decolonizing Photography History November 4, 2014 https://dodgeburnphoto.com/2014/11/photographer-interview-nona-faustine/. Accessed November 18, 2018.} \]
enslavement contained within these structures and upon which they are constituted into high relief. In one image, she stands nude on a wooden box with her hands shackled in the middle of Wall Street and its imposing architectural buildings. Here, Faustine creates a startling testament to the central role of black bodies in the rise of American capitalism. That is, she signals Wall Street’s history as the site of New York’s slave market in the 18th century, where thousands of enslaved men and women stood on rudimentary wooden boxes to be inspected, bought and sold. The profundity of Faustine’s presence is reinforced by the yellow cab that approaches in the background of the image. Her presence thus signifies, as critic Loring Knoblauch puts it, “the residue of history rising up to meet the present.” Yet the series attests that even beyond Wall Street, the hidden history of slavery upon which New York is built is extensive. Faustine’s figure is also pictured lying on the rocks along the Brooklyn coast; her presence suggestive of a corpse of an enslaved woman who has washed ashore. In other images, she is depicted pushing her full weight against the broad columns of the Tweed Courthouse that overlooks the African Burial Ground, standing in front of Lefferts House, the homestead of one of the largest slave-owning families in Brooklyn, as well as standing in a whites-only cemetery.

where she has placed cardboard cutouts of herself on pedestals in homage to the unnamed enslaved persons who were owned by the families buried there.\textsuperscript{362}

While Faustine’s series reveals the histories of black enslavement and bondage that are ever-present in architecture and that form the literal foundations of major American cityscapes, Ingrid Pollard’s 1988 work entitled \textit{Pastoral Interlude} exposes the logics of racialization at work in conceptions of rural landscapes. In the series of images, Pollard is pictured standing, sitting, or walking alone in an area of the English countryside known as Lake District, a region said to epitomize “authentic rural Britain.” Captions that accompany the images further compound the sense of remote isolation evoked in the images. One caption in particular reads: “it’s as if the Black experience is only lived within an urban environment. I thought I liked the Lake District; where I wandered lonely as a Black face in a sea of white. A visit to the countryside is always accompanied by a feeling of unease; dread.” In the previous chapter, I noted art historian

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\textsuperscript{362} Ibid. See also LaTanya Autry, “Making Them Known: Nona Faustine” \textit{Artspace}, accessed November 29, 2018, https://artspacenewhaven.org/exhibitions/nona-faustine/,

In her series entitled \textit{My Country} (2016), Faustine continues to engage with the trauma of history, but through national historic sites. The series consists of images of a number of national monuments and historic sites in New York and Washington D.C., including the Statue of Liberty, the Lincoln Memorial and the Washington Monument. In each of them, a blurred grey line appears through the image, disrupting the view of the site. Here, critic Latanya Autry contends, Faustine questions the symbolic legacies that are assigned to certain sites and signifies the way in which a site can simultaneously represent commemorative legacy for some, while it represents trauma for others.
Kellie Jones’s analysis of Pollard’s use of text and image in the series to make visible black women’s experiences of living their lives in, but also not entirely of, the dominant culture. Yet, significant for my interests in this chapter, Mathilde Bertrand draws out the significance of the rural landscape in Pollard’s series even further. The prevailing cultural conception of the English rural landscape, she contends, is itself constituted by notions of power, social order and homogeneity.363 That is, Pollard’s work exposes the way in which the rural landscape is not merely a symbolic representation of the dominant culture; it is a spatial apparatus through which racial logics and ideologies are asserted. In particular, the series recalls 18th century British landscape painting, a genre that imbued and reinforced associations of the rural countryside with values of purity and order and sought to situate that geographic space as the domain of the British middle class.364 Through landscape painting, nature and rural areas are managed, ordered and turned into a view to be enjoyed, thus masking its dimensions as a space determined by social, economic and political realities.365 Pollard’s presence as the lone black figure in a rural landscape brings these dimensions into view. More specifically, the figure intrudes upon the enduring narrative of homogenous, ordered and “unalloyed white rural Englishness” and gives material reality to the socially produced boundaries that determine who

364 Ibid, 5.
365 Ibid.
“belongs” where. In so doing, as Bertrand points out, the work exposes the fallacy of the notion that landscapes are a value-free mode of representation.

Pastoral Interlude and its attention to the social logics embedded within conceptions of rural landscapes is instructive for my analysis of Weems’s Roaming. That is, what Pastoral Interlude demonstrates in the way of the ideas of racial difference at work in conceptions of the British countryside, Roaming also achieves to a similar effect, but through architecture. More specifically, Weems’s avatar performance up against rationalist architectural edifices in Rome exposes the ways in which logics that undergird the Western social order, particularly those that attend notions of the self-determining, rational European subject vis-à-vis its constitutive affectable “others,” are reflected and asserted in the aesthetic dimensions of the architecture that appears in the images. To be sure, scholars have noted Weems’s performative confrontation with markers of Western civilization and hegemony in the series. In their attention to Roaming, Kimberly Juanita Brown and Sarah Jane Cervenak make brief acknowledgments of the structures as symbolic representations of Western power and state hegemony. Nevertheless, neither provide an elaboration concerning how the structures embody such representations. Without offering any further elucidation, Brown writes that the structures that appear in the series of images “have drastically impacted the history of Western civilization” and that their staggering size connote the “hyperpresence of constructed power,” specifically

366 Ibid, 7.  
367 Ibid, 6.
that of empire and its power over bodies and over the course of time. Cervenak writes that the structures embody the hegemony of the state “that constrains black mobility,” but does provide not any further elaboration concerning how the structures are imbued with this sense of power and social control. Their brief acknowledgements of the

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368 Kimberly Juanita Brown, *The Repeating Body: Slavery’s Visual Resonance in the Contemporary* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 177. Brown considers *Roaming* along with Weems’s series entitled *The Louisiana Project*. She posits that the artist’s diminutive body in the context of the massive structures not only signals the expansive power of empire both over bodies and over the course of time, but it also signifies survival of conquest. In particular, Weems’s repetitive, purposeful wanderings throughout the series, in which she moves from structure to structure, amount to “echoes of racialized haunting” that permeates every building, reflecting a mysterious survival “within and beyond death, ruin, haunting, slavery, gender, empire and form.”

369 Sarah Jane Cervenak, *Wandering: Philosophical Performances of Racial and Sexual Freedom* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 150. According to Cervenak, Weems, along with William Pope L. and Adrian Piper, engages in a “wayward movement and wandering” that transgresses the severe constraints and policing around black mobility that has persisted since slavery and continues into the contemporary moment. These constraints, she argues, are rooted in conceptions of black physical and geographic movement as dangerous and criminal as well as in fears of black “affectability” or “reckless unguidedness” that dates back to the post-Enlightenment period. Importantly, here, Cervenak follows from Denise Ferreira da Silva’s argument that the category of subjectivity is, as I delineated in Chapter 2, an inherently racialized classificatory mechanism that is premised upon hierarchical, paradigmatic distinctions between “normative” European self-determining subjects who exist within the interior realm of critical reason and rationality and their constitutive affectable black and colonized “others” who are governed by exterior forces. For Cervenak, state-imposed limits on black movement—whether through the bondage of enslavement or through contemporary forced sterilization practices and stop-and-frisk law enforcement tactics—resonates with the post-Enlightenment’s figuration of black and colonized non-subjects as “guided by an illegitimate, unlawful outside.” This figuration secures and legitimizes conceptions of European capitalist-driven subjects as maintaining “controlled, unaffected, and teleological mobility.” Cervenak further contends that Weems’s performance of wandering in *Roaming* produces otherworldly, errant movement that subverts the regulations of capitalist, white supremacist, heteronormative, patriarchal logics of post-Enlightenment modernity and its subjects.
symbolism of Western civilization and power at work in the buildings prompts an inquiry concerning how the physical structures might actually embody such themes in a material way. I take up this inquiry through my contention that their observations concerning the symbolic power of the architecture in *Roaming* is even more significant than either of their analyses perhaps let on. That is, logics that undergird notions of Western social order are not merely symbolically represented in monumental buildings that are located in Rome, a city credited as a central archetype in the Western urban psyche, but rather, these logics are embedded within the very material elements of the architectural design.\textsuperscript{370}

In his exploration of how national regimes use architecture to express political power and legitimize their rule, Lawrence Vale speaks to the political and ideological significance of architecture through his contention that all buildings are products of, and thus reflective of, particular social and cultural conditions.\textsuperscript{371} Grand monumental structures, most especially government buildings, he argues, legitimate hierarchy and extremes of power; the designs of many of these structures “remain closely tied to political forces that reinforce existing patterns of dominance and submission.”\textsuperscript{372} As a frame of reference, Vale quotes Lewis Mumford’s seminal work on the development of

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\textsuperscript{372} Ibid, 8, 10.
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early capitol buildings in cities such as Rome, China and Athens that took the characteristic form of the citadel, a spatially dominant structure of power and privilege:

The heavy walls of hard-baked clay or solid stone would give to the ephemeral offices of state the assurance of stability and security, of unrelenting power and unshakable authority. What we now call ‘monumental architecture’ is first of all the expression of power, and that power exhibits itself in the assemblage of costly building materials and of all the resources of art, as well as in a command of all manner of sacred adjuncts, great lions and bulls and eagles, with whose mighty virtues the head of state identifies his own frailer abilities. The purpose of this art was to produce respectful terror.\textsuperscript{373}

The expressions of power at work in monumental architectural structures and their symbolism works to foment hierarchies of social distinction between those in authority and their supplicants. More specifically, according to Murray Edelman, the grand scale of such structures carries a kind of dual, contradictory evocation: on the one hand, their scale reminds the social and political masses that they are clients and supplicants in precincts of power and, thus, subject to arbitrary rebuffs and favors from remote and unknown authorities.\textsuperscript{374} On the other hand, this same monumentality carries a reciprocal meaning for those who enter the structures with authority. According to Edelman, the grand scale of the setting reinforces their power and their class distinction in contrast to those who are determined by their decisions.\textsuperscript{375} In this way, he further contends, these

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\textsuperscript{375} Ibid.
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spaces “legitimate the power of elites and of officials in exactly the same way that they highlight the vulnerability of non-elites…”

Informed by these analyses, I approach *Roaming* with an aim toward considering, as Edelman puts it, the “architectural evocations” of power and social order depicted in the series. In the following section, I delineate how the defining logics associated with the self-determining, rational European subject are spatially evoked and asserted in the aesthetic dimensions of the rationalist architecture that the avatar figure is positioned in and up against. This will lead to the final section in which I contend that although the avatar performance in one way suggests the conception of affectable black and colonized object “others” against which Europe’s white subjects exist in stark contrast, her performance of “spectacular opacity” in the context of the structures, obstructs her full legibility and thus disrupts efforts to measure and classify her according to imposed spatialized logics implicit in the structures.

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376 Ibid.
377 Ibid.
378 My analysis here has some resonances with Cervenak’s treatment of the series, specifically her concern with how the work offers a depiction that interrogates and subverts the regulating logics of subjectivity. Yet, distinct from my approach, Cervenak analyzes these logics through her primary focus on the notions of movement and wandering. Weems’s errant movement in the series, she contends, not only signals black “affectability” and its subjugation under state-imposed regulation, but it also stands in contrast to features of post-Enlightenment subjectivity, that is, “the illusion of a normative body that enjoys and regulates his or her own ‘autonomous, self-motivated, endless, spectacular movement.’” Rather than a primary concern with ideas of movement and mobility, I lodge my analysis of the logics of subjectivity as they are represented through the architectural structures. What is more, my argument concerning the possibility proffered through Weems’s performance hinges not so much on her errant movement, but on her opaque, illegible presence in the images.
4.3. Architectural Evocations of Subjectivity

In arguing for architectural evocations of the subjectivity in *Roaming*, I want to first focus specifically on a delineation of the way in which the spatial conceptions of the European subject as interior, coherent and ordered take form in the architectural design of two structures in particular in the series: the Palazzo della Civiltà Italiana (Palace of Italian Civilization) and the Palazzo dei Congressi (the Congress Palace).\(^{379}\) Built in the 20\(^{th}\) century, both structures were conceived as part of the Esposizione Universale di Roma (Universal Exposition of Rome, EUR), a site that is credited as fascist dictator Benito Mussolini’s most ambitious building project in his larger effort to construct a Fascist “Third Rome” in the 1930s.\(^ {380}\) This conception of the city was one that promoted both the renewal of Rome’s epoch imperial presence that dated back to its ancient and medieval history as well as the promise of a “regenerated Italy” that would be at the vanguard of a radically “new universal civilization.”\(^ {381}\) The EUR was to be made up of

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\(^{379}\) Weems’s avatar also stands against ancient Roman architecture in the work. Given my focus on the spatial logics of the post-Enlightenment modern subject, I focus here on the Italian Rationalist structures in the work because of their distinct ties to modern architectural theory espoused during the Enlightenment period.


permanent structures that epitomized this vision as the “nucleus of a global Olympics of civilization” that also embodied a sense of Italy’s national history and identity.\(^{382}\)

This emphasis on melding the imperial qualities of the past with the present in anticipation of the future was reflected in the particular architectural aesthetic choices at work in the EUR structures. In envisioning the structural designs, Marcello Piacentini, Mussolini’s chief architect of the project, sought an aesthetic that reflected somewhat of a compromise between the classical monumental spirit of Rome’s past and the modern/functional forms that were gaining increased presence across the region and Northern Europe through international modernism.\(^{383}\) This compromise was taken up by architects associated with the Italian Rationalist tradition, as the Modern Movement was referred to in Italy, who created structures for the EUR that were representative of the priority they placed on clarity and order rooted in history and tradition as well as strict aesthetic adherence to notions of logic and rationality, which was characterized by an

characteristics, the effort was not to promote a nostalgic return to the past. Rather, it was to incorporate qualities associated with past eras into a society, a society fully reflective of 20th century industrialism and technology.\(^{382}\) Tinniswood, 148.

emphasis on function and simplicity of surfaces over ornamentation, symmetrical/geometric shadows and spatial forms, and an open/closed alternating rhythm between geometric forms. Their focus on these particular characteristics is indicative of their adherence to the 18th century foundational features of rationalist architecture that, I contend, produce spatialized conceptions of subjectivity. Before delineating these foundational features, however, it is necessary to elaborate upon what is meant by spatial logics of the subject.

In her delineation of subjectivity as a racialized classificatory paradigm, Denise Ferreira da Silva’s choice of metaphors is suggestive of the way in which subjectivity is a spatialized/geographic project. As noted in Chapter 2, Da Silva argues that the category of subjectivity is an inherently racialized classificatory mechanism that is premised upon hierarchical, constitutive distinctions between “normative” European subjects whose defining qualities as self-determining, autonomous, and rational were established in contradistinction to their purportedly inferior, affectable object “others,” namely

384 Kruft, 410. The Italian Rationalist architectural approach was first articulated through a large-scale manifesto written by a group of young Italian architects known as the “Gruppo 7” published in the journal *Rassegna Italiana* in 1926 and 1927. Although many of the distinguishing characteristics of their approach resembled those emphasized by international modernism, such as avoidance of ornament, modular forms, and simple flat surfaces, they asserted their divergence from international modernism. In particular, they saw themselves as doing more than simply adopting architectural practices from Germany, Austria, Holland or Scandinavia and applying it to Italian structures. They insisted that they were engaged in a “constructive rationalism” that took Italy’s particular landscape and climate into account. Furthermore, they promoted deep investments in Italian history and tradition, despite their rejection of historical ornamental facades of traditionalist architecture. According to Kruft, their movement would initiate the Movimento Italiano per l’Architettura Razionale (Italian Movement for Rational Architecture, or MIAR). See Kruft, 407-409.
indigenous, black and non-European populations, who were said to be governed by uncontrollable instinct and exterior forces.\textsuperscript{385} According to Da Silva, the effort to secure the exclusive qualities attributed to European subjects “resulted in the outlining of two symbolic \textit{regions}, the stage of interiority and the stage of exteriority, in which universal reason plays its sovereign role.”\textsuperscript{386} The realm of interiority was exclusive to European subjects, those able to access and harness the interior powers of universal reason; the realm of exteriority was inhabited by black and colonized “others” who were said to be governed by “exterior determination” of the laws of nature and the regulations imposed by the superior rational capacities of European subjects.\textsuperscript{387}

Da Silva’s metaphorical “regions” that distinguish the mind of the Western subject from that of its constitutive others took on material, geographic form through European conquest and expansion. Kathleen Kirby notes that in the context of European colonization efforts across the globe, the imperial subjects held foreign lands and the people in them as apart from themselves, maintaining them as foreign, ‘exotic,’ other, inhuman, separate from the ‘self,’ and basically unlike themselves. In some cases, they incorporated the people and territories they encountered into their own self-image, obliterating difference.\textsuperscript{388} The conception of non-European geographical regions as

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\item Da Silva, 31. Emphasis mine.
\item Ibid.
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uncontrollable, chaotic, and incoherent propped up notions of the spatial form of the individual subject as ordered, coherent, consistent and, importantly, unquestionably distinct from other subjects and the external environment. According to Kirby, the conceived spatial form of the subject was graphically reflective of an enclosed circle and emblematic of Enlightenment philosopher René Descartes’ emphasis on the Cartesian subject as maintaining the ability to enclose itself off or keep at bay instinctual senses and other external influences beyond the interiority of the rational mind. Here, Kirby makes reference to Descartes’s *Meditations on First Philosophy* wherein the philosopher describes the subject in a way that suggests the smooth contours of circular enclosure: “I shall now close my eyes, stop up my ears, withdraw all my senses, I shall even efface from my thinking all images of corporeal things; or since that can hardly be done, I shall at least view them as empty and false.” Descartes’ musing here suggests that from inside the circle of the rational self and closed off from exteriority, all is consistent and coherent, while “outside lies a vacuum in which objects appear within their own bubbles, self-contained and separate, but largely irrelevant to this autonomous, self-sufficient Ego.” For European colonizing subjects, the notion of their stable, coherent spatial

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389 JanMohamed, 84.
390 Kirby, 38.
392 Ibid.
figuration enabled them to maintain their purported interiority even as they moved through the non-European outside, external world. That is, according to Kirby, the concept of the “safely encapsulated independent subject” was an operating premise at work in the European projects of colonization and, relatedly, exploration and cartography. As Europeans traveled to foreign lands and made contact with their inhabitants, the land and its people were externalized and held at a distance, such that the explorers preserved the conception of their stable, rationalized space while occupying space that was considered chaotic and mobile without risk of contamination.

Kirby’s reference to Descartes’s spatial logics of the subject is particularly significant for my interests in the ways in which the Italian Rationalist architecture in Roaming evokes conceptions of subjectivity. A central figure in philosophical tradition or rationalism, Descartes’s thinking would significantly inform the theoretical foundations of rationalist architecture. His emphasis on arithmetic and the purity of geometric forms

393 Ibid, 53.
394 Ibid, 49.
395 Ibid. Kirby bases her observations here on her study of European travel accounts during the Enlightenment era, specifically Samuel de Champlain’s Voyages of Samuel de Champlain, 1604-1618 and Cabeza de Vaca’s Adventures in the Unknown Interior of America. De Champlain’s account in particular is reflective of the cartographer’s sense of distance from the land in which he mapped and explored. According to Kirby, he describes what he sees as though he is not there, “as if no one were there, as if the land he details exists wholly outside any human perception.” In this way, he maintains the ideal of an encapsulated, independent subject by diminishing the relationship between himself as the subject and the environment. He removes himself from the environment “to ensure the uncontaminated primacy of the self.” Kirby notes that cartography was a particularly ideal method in reinforcing the spatial logics of the subject as the work of Enlightenments-era cartographers involved removing themselves from the landscape so that they could “reapprehend” the land according to a conventional, prescribed system of representation in which other topographies could be substituted.
as universal, immutable entities as central sources of knowledge that could not be tainted by the uncontrollable whims of the senses was translated into architecture and urban design by 18th century architects and theorists associated with rationalism, such as Marc-Antoine Laugier and Étienne-Louis Boullée. Geoffre Broadbent notes that Boullée in particular championed the architectural virtues of pure geometry. Boullée extolled the form of the sphere, a rounded geometric circular enclosure with perfect symmetry, such that every point on its surface is equidistant from the center. The sphere, Boullée contended, was self-evident in its image of unchangeable, indubitable order through its reflection of three essential elements: regularity, symmetry and variety. He wrote, “regularity produces in objects beauty of forms; symmetry their order and their beautiful harmony; variety of faces which themselves are diversified to our eyes. So, by the bringing together and agreement resulting from all these properties, is born the harmony

396 Geoffre Broadbent, Emerging Concepts in Urban Space Design (London: Von Nostrand Reinhold, 1990), 87-96. As Kirby’s reference to Descartes suggests, a distinctive feature of rationalist thought was its critique of the senses. In response to the empiricist philosophical tradition, which contended that it is through human senses and experience that knowledge about the world is gained, Descartes and those who espoused rationalism argued that the senses could be confused by optical illusions, delusions and hallucinations and, thus, could not be trusted. Following from Plato, instead of an emphasis on the senses, universal truths reached through logical thinking was understood as the key to knowledge. For Descartes, arithmetic and geometry were especially amenable to this mode of thought as they dealt with universal, indubitable, immutable entities that take concrete, physical form, such as shapes and figures of objects extended in space as well as their magnitude, numbers, and time in which they endure. Geometric figures, such as triangles, squares, and pentagons, possess manifest truths, such that they maintain a nature, a form, an essence that is immutable and eternal and, thus, could not be tainted by the whims of the senses.

397 Ibid, 92-94.
398 Ibid, 94.
of the figure.” Boullée’s emphasis on geometric form and symmetry of an enclosed area is indicative of the space that the European subject is said to occupy: an ordered, coherent spatial interiority that stands, as Descartes’ analysis suggests, as a form unto itself, separate and encapsulated from the space occupied by other subjects.

Weems’ *Roaming* depicts the avatar figure in front of the Palazzo della Civiltà Italiana and the Palazzo dei Congressi, both of which adhere to the rationalist architectural emphasis on geometric form and symmetry. In so doing, their respective designs reflect the spatial logics of the subject. The Palazzo dei Congressi, designed by Adalberto Libero in 1938, is lined with a colonnade of stone pillars across the front of the building. Their organization into a row magnifies their precise equidistance. Further reinforcing the evident emphasis on symmetry and form, a large geometric cube sits atop the structure. In the case of the Palazzo della Civiltà Italiana, designed by Giovanni Guerini, Ernesto Bruno LaPadula and Mario Romano beginning in 1939, it is lined with replicas of the Roman arches that appear on the ancient Coliseum in the center of Rome. Their perfectly identical symmetry is also made evident through their organization in strict rows along the entire building. While the spatial logics of ideal order, control and coherence that attend the European subject are certainly reflected in the perfect symmetry of these geometric forms, the logics are reflected even further through the way in which the symmetrical forms structurally exemplify encapsulated enclosures. This is perhaps

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399 Ibid. This analysis was published in Boullée’s work entitled *Architecture: Essay on Art*. Although the work contained essays Boullée wrote during the late 18th century, they were not published until 1952. See Étienne-Louis Boullée, *Architecture: Essay on Art*, ed. Helen Rosenau (London: Academy Editions, 1976).
most obvious through the enclosed cube that sits atop the Palazzo Congressi. Yet, the row of stone pillars that form the colonnade in front of the structure also work together to form a row of fourteen equidistant rectangles. The multiple iterations of the rectangles in an orderly line, as well as the multiple iterations of the Roman arches that line the Palazzo della Civiltà Italiana give off the effect that each geometric form is representative of a self-contained enclosure that maintain its strict independence from the next geometric form in the line. Although there are multiples, as with the coherent, self-contained subject, each is a form unto itself such; their precise equidistance from one another reinforces the notion that there is no threat of overlap with the next form.

Notably, in addition to the Roman arches, the Palazzo della Civiltà Italiana is also accompanied by sculpted forms on each side of its monumental staircase that represent the Dioscuri figures in Greek mythology. The inclusion of these sculpted forms is in line with another fundamental aspect of rationalist architecture: its emphasis on simplicity and ideal, “regular” forms over against excess, ornamentation and irregularity. According to Broadbent, Boullée posited his analysis of the symmetry of geometric forms based on observations about the physical body; that is, he argued, “regularity, symmetry and variety constitute the form of regular bodies” and gave them their ideal proportion in comparison to “irregular forms.”

Here, Boullée’s observations speak to how, according to Irene Cheng, geometric forms in architecture have been imbued with analogies to human bodies since the emergence of architectural theory in the work of Vitruvius, who

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400 Ibid.
argued that the symmetry of buildings was comparable to the “well-made man.” Cheng notes that by the late 18th century, notably the same time period in which Boulée was writing, these “anthropomorphic overtones” were compounded with the rise of race science and entrenched ideas of racial hierarchy in Enlightenment aesthetic theory. These ideas advanced not only the notion that external physical attributes were an indicator of character, but also value judgments about the relative beauty of racial groups vis-a-vis the European ideal type. Art and architecture historian Johann Winckelmann’s 18th century neoclassical writings, a traditional closely associated with rationalism, are emblematic of this discourse. He articulated a preference for the symmetrical “beauty” of European subjects and the simple forms they produced in art and architecture, over and against the purported “irregular” bodily “deformities” of

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402 Ibid, 124.

403 Ibid.
Africans and other non-European populations he deemed “incompatible with the unity of form of the body.” According to Winckelmann, Greek art in particular was superior largely by virtue of the physical beauty of the Greek people, “whose bodies were nurtured by a perfect climate, whose diets included a minimum of corrupting substances.” Concerning Africans Winckelmann wrote,

The mouth swollen and raised, such as the Negroes have in common with the monkeys of their country, is a superfluous excrescence, a swelling caused by the heat of the climate, as our lips are inflated by heat, or by an abundance of bitter humours; a swelling that anger can also produce.

Winckelmann’s descriptions here signal the ways in which the rationalist architectural emphasis on simplicity and ideal, “regular” forms over against excess, ornamentation and irregularity was informed by racialized conceptions of the body and were, moreover, on par with spatialized ideas of the European subject. The precise simplicity and symmetry of the preferred Greek form is tied to the purportedly controlled, amenable geographic conditions that are said to define its spatial context of the European subject, while the excessive, irregular African form is determined by what is characterized as the extreme, irrational climate endemic to the chaotic exterior regions out of which it emerges.

405 Mallgrave, 30.
In Weems’s *Roaming*, The Palazzo dei Congressi and the Palazzo della Civiltà Italiana both display a type of simplicity in their surfaces and geometric forms that seems to insist on the absence of ornamentation, embellishment and “irregular,” asymmetrical forms. The Palazzo dei Congress is a smooth marble structure with large, rectangular glass windows that line the lower portion of the structure while the Palazzo della Civiltà Italiana is comprised of enforced concrete covered by travertine. Pursuant with the architectural dictates of Mussolini’s Fascism, the aforementioned colonnade of stone pillars and Roman arches are noticeably stripped-down versions of the classic aesthetics of Italian imperial history. The stone pillars that line the Palazzo dei Congressi, a building that resembles, as Adrian Tinniswood notes, an airplane hanger, are without the traditionally decorative capitals along the top. The Palazzo della Civiltà Italiana is known as the “square Colosseum” for its sleek version of the Roman arches that resemble the colosseum in Rome. The simple structural surfaces of these buildings are certainly emblematic of the ideas of the subject as occupying coherent, ordered, and consistent space. Furthermore, the simple surfaces on the structures work together to create an open/closed alternating rhythm that reinforces the spatialized notions of subjectivity on another register. For instance, the closed surface portions of the building structure, such as the flat travertine wall, work together with their open surface portions, such as window surfaces, to create depth and shadow spaces. This elicits a palpable distinction between the buildings’ interior (the open, in depth shadow spaces) and their exterior (the flat, closed surfaces). This distinction is suggestive of Descartes’s notion of the subject as

407 Tinniswood, 149.
having aspects of the body that could effectively be closed to exteriority in order to maintain its rational, measured interiority.

Architectural evocations of the European subject appear in Weems’s *Roaming* through its photographic depiction of Italian Rationalist structures that adhere to the fundamental features of rationalist architectural tradition that includes perfect symmetry of geometric forms, the simplicity of surfaces over ornamentation, and the open/closed rhythms of its geometrical surfaces. These features demonstrate and are on par with spatial logics of subjectivity that apprehend and posit European subjects as maintaining coherent, controlled spatial order in constitutive contrast to the irregular, chaotic, dissymmetrical forms of African and other non-European spatial configurations. The ways in which these logics undergird rationalist architectural forms demonstrates, as Cheng notes, how race operated as the “sublimated ghost” of modern aesthetics.408

As the avatar figure in *Roaming* resolutely situates her body up against the Italian Rationalist structures in the series, she indeed leads the viewer into, as Weems aptly puts it, “circumstances seldom seen”: she embodies and foregrounds the ghostly presence of race that undergirds modern architecture. That is, if the aforementioned structures represent the spatial logics of interiority that attend the modern Western subject, the stark placement of the avatar’s black female body up against these structures is suggestive of the purported chaotic and uncontrollable exteriority of black and colonized “others”

against which the spatial logics of the subject are constituted. Here, McKittrick’s work on black geographies adds dimension and a way to articulate the larger stakes of the avatar figure’s stark exterior placement and what I argue are the racialized spatial distinctions at work in subjectivity more generally. That is, the configuration of coherent, rational, ordered, interior spatiality of the European subject vis-à-vis the chaotic, uncontrollable exteriority of black and colonized “others” is resonant with and indicative of McKittrick’s notion that blackness is posited as “ungeographic” according to the logics of traditional geography.

McKittrick defines geography as both landscapes as well as three-dimensional spaces and infrastructures, including architecture and other forms of the built environment. According to McKittrick, “traditional geography,” which refers to “formulations that assume we can view, assess, and ethically organize the world from a stable (white, patriarchal, Eurocentric, heterosexual, classed) vantage point,” requires and is dependent upon geographic domination in the form of black displacement and the subjugation of black populations, such that they stay “in place.” More specifically, she posits, traditional geography is constituted by what Ruth Wilson Gilmore calls “displacement of difference” whereby particular kinds of bodies are materially and visibly configured and disciplined by racism into social hierarchies of distinction that are

409 McKittrick, xiii.
410 Ibid, xiii, 9, 12. McKittrick uses the term “traditional geography” to refer to both the academic discipline of human geography and dominant geographic patterns.
then spatially organized. Fanon’s racial primal scene helps to elaborate upon how black bodies are both reconfigured and, by extension, spatially displaced by racist visual encodings. As I delineated in the previous chapter, Fanon’s famously recalled moment of racist interpellation recounts the power of the “white gaze” to remake and classify black bodies according to a “racial epidermal schema.” But while I emphasized how the gaze sealed Fanon into the paradigmatic ontological status of the “object negation” of whiteness, McKittrick notes in her attention to Fanon’s recitation that the gaze also has spatial and geographic implications: it imprisons Fanon’s body in “in place.” When he is seen and interpellated as a “Negro,” according to McKittrick, his humanity is dislocated and he is forced “to recognize his black ‘place’ in the world.”

Fanon writes, “I was told to stay within bounds, to go back where I belonged.” Here, McKittrick contends, through the regulating eye of the white gaze, Fanon’s sense of self and location are defined by an unwelcoming white world that imprisons, objectifies and spatially relegates him to the realm of the “ungeographic.” This notion of the ungeographic is premised upon what McKittrick identifies as the way in which the discipline of human geography and traditional spatial patterns strategically define and arrange the world from a unitary vantage point that leaves black people and communities out or that posits them as merely inconsequential objects in geographic considerations and investigations.

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412 Ibid, 25.
415 Ibid, 11.
geographic knowledges and experiences of these communities are cast as nonexistent, unreliable and subordinate to traditional geographic considerations. Moreover, at work in this form of geographic domination, is a configuration of black bodies based on racial signs and schemas that render them as “unruly, deviant,” and without the capacity to produce space and participate in geographic progress. Blackness, McKittrick contends, is thus “perceived as inevitably, or naturally, ungeographic and/or ghettoized.”

McKittrick’s analysis here concerning Fanon’s spatial displacement through racist visual encodings and conceptions of blackness as ungeographic provides further elaboration on the stakes of the exterior placement of Weems’s avatar figure vis-à-vis the ordered, rational logics of the subject evoked by the Italian Rationalist architectural design. That is, there are geographic assumptions and implications of power and domination at work in subjectivity’s racialized spatial logics and distinctions that situate black spatiality as exterior to and distinct from the ordered, coherent spatial dimensions of the European subject. McKittrick’s analysis concerning the geographic domination and spatial displacement of black women in particular provides an apt summation that speaks to the exterior placement of Weems’s avatar figure and the notions of power and domination at stake in such a positioning: “For black women, then, geographic domination is worked out through reading and managing their specific racial-sexual bodies. This management effectively, but not completely, displaces black geographic knowledge by assuming that

416 Ibid.
417 Ibid, 9.
418 Ibid, 11.
black femininity is altogether knowable, unknowing, and expendable: she is seemingly in place by being out of place.”

4.4. Black Geographies: Taking Up Space

While the (dis)placement of the avatar figure in one way demonstrates the geographic assumptions and domination at play in subjectivity’s spatial logics, the figure also engages in subversive performative maneuvers that constitute the generative enactments of the flesh that define black religion. That is, these maneuvers undercut the totalizing nature of geographic domination and, reflective of black religion, mark a point of possibility for complex, open, ever-shifting ways of being that exceed the imposed, regulating social and, in this case, spatial logics of dominant society and its prescribed ontologies.

This black religious possibility is demonstrated in the way in which the avatar figure is positioned up against the Italian Rationalist structures with her back to the camera lens. Her body, as Kimberly Juanita Brown aptly puts it, is thus “a text unread and unfixed.” In this way, she disrupts the totalizing nature of geographic domination by interfering with a thorough “reading and managing” of her body according to racialized spatial logics. Instead, she engages in what Daphne Brooks identifies as the performative strategy of “spectacular opacity” that has been a marker of black

420 Brown, The Repeating Body, 182.
performance traditions since the 19th century.\textsuperscript{421} That is, she contests the imposition of transparency and eschews forms of recognition according to the dominating spatial logics of subjectivity posited by the structures around her. This strategy of performance presents what Brooks refers to as “dark points of possibility,” such that through “doing their bodies differently in public spaces,” black performers create symbolic sites for reconfiguring black and female bodies on display.\textsuperscript{422} For the black female figure in Roaming, her opacity leaves the nature of her existence open and unclassifiable, thus confounding subjectivity’s spatialized logics that position her as the spatially incoherent object negation against which the European subject’s spatiality is legitimized and defined. Moreover, she calls into question the notion that she is “ungeographic” and thus without geographic and spatial knowledge and engagement. That is, she is not so much a readable, classifiable body that stands “in place.” Rather, she is an ambiguous, excess fleshly figure that \textit{takes up space}. Her body is something of an interjecting diversion; even in its diminutive size, her body is depicted in such stark contrast to the buildings that it prevents the viewer from having a seamless, unobstructed view of the architecture. In this way, the figure not only disrupts the reading and calculation of her body according to the dominating spatial logics of the subject through her body’s opaque, open ambiguity, but she also obscures the seamless evocation of these logics by taking up space in front of the buildings from which these evocations are dispensed.

\textsuperscript{421} Brooks, 8.
\textsuperscript{422} Ibid.
The black female avatar figure warrants further consideration for how she constitutes a black religious enactment of the flesh on an additional register. In addition to her opacity, her interjecting presence is suggestive of an alternative to the predominating spatial logics imposed by the Italian Rationalist architecture and points toward the possibility of black geographies that exceed these spatial logics. Here, it is necessary to consider the nature of the photographic form and still images. Even as the figure subversively stands against the structures with her back turned, it could be argued that, by virtue of her stillness in the images, she remains fixed in place, her diminutive body forever held in subjection to the spatial logics imposed by the grand scale of the expansive architectural structures before her. In his seminal theoretical work on photography, Roland Barthes contends that this kind of fixed, motionless representation of the photographic sitter is an inherent byproduct of the medium of photography. In *Camera Lucida*, Barthes defined three perspectives from which critics generally analyze a photograph: the Operator (photographer), the Spectator (the viewer) and the Spectrum (the sitter). Significant for Barthes was the position of the Spectrum. To be the Spectrum, he argued, is to be a subject who becomes an object; it is to experience a “micro-version of death” wherein the image is totalizing and, moreover, one is held at the disposal of the viewer. In this way, for Barthes, photographs elicit a kind of death. He elucidates this point even further when he argues that in some photographs, images have

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424 Ibid, 14. Barthes contends that photographs can contain what he refers to as a “punctum,” or an element that arises out of the photograph and pierces the viewer in a way that is beyond their control.
a way of dying in the frame through motionlessness. Barthes writes, “when we define the photograph as a motionless image, this not only means that the figures it represents do not move; it means that they do not emerge, do not leave: they are anesthetized and fastened down, like butterflies.”

In considering the avatar figure in Roaming, I endeavor to push for an alternative thinking around the notion of photographic stillness and objectification of the sitter, particularly in relation to black people. While Barthes contends that the motionlessness in images reduces the sitter from subject to object and, thus, constitutes a type of death, his analysis takes on a different kind of significance when considered in the context of the history of photography and race. As I delineated in Chapter 1, this history is one in which the objecthood status of black people was not only a matter of representation; it extended beyond the photographic frame and into social and political life where it carried devastating material implications. In this context, photography was employed as a strategic tool toward somewhat different and certainly more insidious ends than Barthes’s analysis accounts for: rather than reducing subjects to objects, the photograph was employed to evidence, confirm and bolster the fundamental object status of black people and, thus, further justify racial violence and inequitable social structures, or what Orlando Patterson refers to as “social death.”

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425 Ibid, 57.
426 Ibid.
In reading Weems’s avatar figure from this perspective, I proffer a different understanding of the figure’s motionlessness in *Roaming*, one based on Tina Campt’s conception of “stasis.” That is, while the figure may appear to be fixed and motionless, what is captured in the image is what Campt more precisely identifies as “muscular tension.” Here, in her study of ethnographic images of black South Africans, Campt draws from the work of Darieck Scott who theorizes this embodied tension as a vision of black possibility, such that it indexes “the paradoxical power of the black body in subjection.” Similar to the tightly pursed lips, the tensed brows, and the “taut skin over engaged musculature” that characterize the men and women in the images in Campt’s study, subtle indications of tension can be detected in the posture of Weems’s figure as she stands before the Italian Rationalist structures. Indeed, what is perhaps most immediately noticeable about the figure is the intention and seeming intensity of her stance: arms held slightly akimbo, back ramrod straight, head held at a direct confrontation with the structure or turned to the side, just so. At work here is not so much motionlessness, but stasis. More specifically, rather than a deadly stillness or immobility, there exists a trace vibration, an “unvisible motion held in tense suspension or temporary equilibrium.” What appears as motionlessness, Campt contends, is an effortful

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429 Ibid, 51.
430 Ibid, 52.
placement, a labored balancing of opposing forces and flows that never arrives at a true or absolute disciplinary state of stillness. In her muscular tension, the figure in Roaming thus signifies black life that persists even in the wake of spatial regulation and subjection.

4.5. Conclusion

Importantly, in demonstrating the generative enactments of the flesh that animate black religion, the figure is not vying for inclusion or to be accounted for within subjectivity’s spatial logics. She remains a stark, opaque figure that stands in contrast to the structures. In signaling the persistence of black life in the wake of spatial subjection according to subjectivity’s logics, she also points toward the existence of black geographies. This involves, as McKittrick conceives it, alternative ways of knowing and writing the social and spatial world that always already exist alongside and even in the middle of the historically present landscape. In the chapter that follows, I continue this consideration concerning black life, spatial logics and geography. More specifically, I expound upon this notion of black geographies and argue that if the avatar figure here in Roaming signals the existence of black geographies that exist in and alongside terrains of domination, Carrie Mae Weems’s Sea Island Series provides a sense of what these black geographies entail.

\[431\] Ibid.
\[432\] McKittrick, xiv.
Chapter 5

Black Landscapes

5.1. Introduction

In Carrie Mae Weems’s 1991 series entitled *Sea Island Series*, the artist set out to capture the unique Gullah-Geechee region located off the coasts of Georgia and South Carolina.\(^{433}\) The Sea Islands, which number over 100 and are often referred to as the “lowcountry” for its low lying altitude, was a central, if not the foremost, arrival

\(^{433}\) In his study of Gullah-Geechee culture, Philip Morgan notes that the term “Gullah” is likely derived from “Angola” or possibly the “Gola” of the Windward Coast, or a combination of the two, and generally refers to black people living in the South Carolina section of the lowcountry. “Geechee” has been attributed to the Kissi of Upper Guinea, but is more likely derived from a shortened form of the Muskogean name of the Ogeechee river in Georgia. Geechee refers to those living south of the Savannah River. See Philip Morgan, ed. *African American Life in the Georgia Lowcountry: The Atlantic World and the Gullah Geechee* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 2010), 1-2.
destination for Africans who were enslaved and forcibly brought to the United States. Yet, even after the trade was outlawed, the navigable fluid ocean recesses of the coastal region facilitated continued covert slave operations. The prolonged importation of enslaved Africans, who grew to far outnumber whites in the region, contributed to making the area a significant site of distinct cultural incubation and syncretism. In addition, the topographic and social independence of the islands as well as the refusal of many white plantation owners to live in the harsh tropical climate for extended periods also created the conditions for the region’s distinctiveness. Anissa Janine Wardi notes that the Sea Islands were “outside the purview and control of conventional plantation society,” such that Africans on the islands had a greater degree of freedom to engage in indigenous practices and maintain vestiges of West African ways of life on American soil. The distinct Gullah-Geechee heritage and region is inscribed with West

434 Morgan, 3. Morgan notes that over half (56 percent) of the Africans who were brought to North America over the course of the slave trade arrived in the lowcountry.
435 Ibid. See also Anissa Janine Wardi, Water and African American Memory: An Ecocritical Perspective (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2011), 34.
436 Wardi, 34. See also Mary A. Twining and Keith E. Baird, ed. Sea Island Roots: African Presence in the Carolinas and Georgia (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1990), vii; William Pollitzer, The Gullah People and Their African Heritage (Athens: The University of Georgia Press), 1999. Citing the work of Jacqueline Jones, Philip Morgan notes that even as the Gullah Geechee maintained a distinct heritage and culture, this included the espousal of values shared by whites, including entrepreneurial tendencies exhibited by blacks, even under the slavery, as well as their commitment to schooling and political participation once freed. See Morgan, 7. See also Jacqueline Jones, “The African American Challenge to the Confederate Project in Civil-War Era Savannah” in Morgan, African American Life in the Georgia Lowcountry.
437 Ibid.
African artistry, family networks, food ways and language, making it a “space of transatlantic memory.”\textsuperscript{438}

After initially becoming interested in the Sea Islands culture while studying folklore at the University of California Berkeley, Weems eventually traveled to the region in 1990 and created a piece of work around it that combines photography, text and ceramics. Concerning the work, she noted in an interview with bell hooks that in addition to a general exploration of the Gullah-Geechee culture, a central question that the series raises and interrogates is how black people “inhabit space and how they construct it.”\textsuperscript{439} According to Weems, “how will you construct the space you inhabit to make it work for you, even when it was not meant to?”\textsuperscript{440} Notably, although the work considers the distinct culture of the lowcountry and how its residents construct and inhabit space, people do not figure prominently in the work. Rather, it is the land and the natural environment of the region that takes center stage throughout the series. The lush landscape with its expansive marshlands, thickets of towering trees draped in Spanish moss, and overgrown greenspaces predominate the images. While the text panels and ceramics detail certain beliefs, traditions and myths of the Gullah-Geechee culture, the absence of the embodied presence of lowcountry inhabitants, those descendants of the former enslaved persons who inherited the land after the Civil War, and a sole focus on the landscape offers a

\textsuperscript{438} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{440} Ibid.
different kind of representation of the culture. This is particularly the case when the series is compared with Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe’s somewhat similar body of work entitled *Daufuskie Island*. Moutoussamy-Ashe’s 1982 collection of sixty-eight black and white photographs are replete with images of residents of Daufuskie, one of the Sea Islands located between Savannah, Georgia and Hilton Head Island. The photographs capture the island’s black residents as they are engaged in everyday life, including family gatherings, children at play, fishing and crabbing, and being transported to and from the mainland on the ferry. In comparison to her other works, Weems has provided very little commentary on the Sea Island Series and, to my knowledge, nothing in the way of an explanation concerning why lowcountry inhabitants do not appear in the work or whether she had any intention of them appearing at all. To be sure, the absence of residents in the images could certainly be read as an indication of the increased migration and displacement of residents occurring across the islands as a result of rapid and profitable resort development in the region. The significance of Moutoussamy-Ashe’s work was in part because the residents pictured were among the last eighty-five permanent residents

on Daufuskie Island.\textsuperscript{443} Weems’s work, completed eight years after Moutoussamy-Ashe’s collection, thus in some ways demonstrates the continued disappearance of the culture and community of lowcountry residents.\textsuperscript{444}

Nevertheless, I will contend in this chapter that while Gullah-Geechee inhabitants do not appear in the \textit{Sea Island Series}, this does not preclude their presence in the work. Importantly, my contention here is based on viewing the images through an appositional black aesthetic approach to black images that emphasizes an exploration into the creative improvisations and alternative social and relational logics that attend black life. In viewing the \textit{Sea Island Series} through this approach, I contend that the work reveals the way in which the distinct lowcountry culture was not only characterized by particular beliefs and rituals around birthing children and burying the dead, but also by alternative approaches to the relationship between humanity and the natural world. Recall here my delineation in the previous chapter of the dominating spatial logics of subjectivity. As I noted, these spatial logics follow from the Enlightenment thought of René Descartes and his notion of a self-contained, rational subject who has the capacity to regulate and keep at bay instinctual senses and other external influences beyond the rational mind. Liz Wells points out the implications of Descartes thought to the relationship between the

\textsuperscript{443} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{444} Relatedly, in addition to development and displacement, it is also possible that residents developed a relative sense of caution and distrust of outsiders seeking to study their culture. Nevertheless, Weems’s own commentary does not indicate whether she ever approached residents to include them in the series.
human subject and nature. Descartes’ ontological separation of the mind and body, she posits, gave credence to the idea that “the human subject is existentially separate from phenomena perceivable through the senses,” principally nature.\footnote{Liz Wells, \textit{Land Matters: Landscape Photography, Culture and Identity} (New York: I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd, 2011), 5.} Within Descartes’ formulation, she writes,

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nature becomes a source of pleasure and bewilderment experienced through touch, taste, smell, hearing and sight. Implicit within this approach is the suggestion that whilst we experience sensation bodily, our rational mind retains an observational and analytic stance.\footnote{Ibid.}
\end{quote}

Resonances of Enlightenment logics of distinctions between nature and the human subject, such as those espoused by Descartes, would be evident in European approaches to exploration and settlement of North American, according to Rachel Stein. That is, nature was conceived as “the antithesis of civilization, as the threatening wilderness that must be tamed and transformed for progressive development to thrive.”\footnote{Rachel Stein, \textit{Shifting the Ground: American Writers’ Revisions of Nature, Gender and Race} (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1997), 6.} In particular, conquest of the land was considered a central aspect of establishing democracy.\footnote{Ibid. 7.} Stein notes that this “conquest imperative” was blend of the Biblical mandate to seize domination of the natural world with the scientific, progressive conception of nature as

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“raw matter to be mastered and made productive by the active human will.” In establishing dominion over nature, Euro-American settlers positioned themselves as separate and superior to the natural world; engagements with it were primarily through notions of possession and production.

Weems’s visual account of lowcountry culture offers an alternative to this formulation of the human/nature relationship. That is, in its depictions of the Sea Island natural environment, where water and marshlands are understood, as Wardi aptly puts it, as “repositories of history,” and where hubcaps jut out from the ground, glass bottles extend from branches, and box springs are suspended between tree trunks, the series demonstrates an interconnected engagement and overlapping relationship between the natural environment and the region’s inhabitants. Thus, as I will delineate in this chapter, rather than occupying distinctly regulated zones, nature and humanity are depicted as overlapping and interconnected. It could be argued, however, that such depictions of objects that have been added to the earth’s terrain are more in line with human pollution of nature than an interconnected engagement with it. While this is a valid argument, I contend that even as the objects are pollutants, there remains a depiction of an interesting, alternative engagement between nature and humanity at work in the series. That is, I concur with bell hooks and her pointed assertion that “people

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449 Ibid, 8.
450 Ibid.
451 Wardi, 49.
should not look at [the Sea Island Series] and reduce it to something simple about the South and how the folks do creative shit with trash.™ 452 Rather, as I will delineate in my attention to the work below, these objects symbolize intentional efforts by humans to be, as hooks notes, “in union with nature—not against, but a part of it.”™ 453 More specifically, these images are indicative of how lowcountry inhabitants exercised a sense of agency and ways of being that were constituted not by their self-containment from the sensory experience of nature, but by their interaction with it as an ecological force.™ 454 In this way, I will argue, while the inhabitants do not appear in the series, their presence persists in the images of the landscapes that depict a sense of interconnectedness with nature is quite literally woven into the natural environment itself.

This concluding chapter is thus a follow up to my previous chapter where I argued that Weems’s avatar figure in Roaming engages in black religious enactments of the flesh that point toward the possibility of black geographies, or what Katherine McKittrick defines as alternative ways of knowing and writing the social and spatial world that always already exist alongside and across structures and terrains of domination.™ 455

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452 hooks, 94.
453 Ibid.
454 I draw this articulation of collaboration with ecological forces from Monique Allewaert, “Swamp Sublime: Ecologies of Resistance in the American Plantation Zone” PMLA 123 (March 2008), 341. My thanks to my colleague, Justine Bakker, for introducing me to Allewaert’s work, along with the African American ecocritical work of Anissa Janine Wardi, and for suggesting both scholars as points of reference for this chapter.
455 Katherine McKittrick, Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), xiv.
Inasmuch as the lowcountry is touted for its distinct cultural beliefs and practices, these were remarkably cultivated in what was, without question, unspeakably violent terrain. Philip Morgan notes that the lowcountry’s infamy was attributed to more than its cultural distinctiveness; the geographically isolated islands were also the site of extraordinary exploitation and violence.\textsuperscript{456} Perhaps no region in the United States, he contends, had harsher forms of slavery than the Sea Islands.\textsuperscript{457} To theorize the possibility of alternative geographic and environmental knowledges and configurations under such all-consuming, insidious brutality might seem a frivolous endeavor at best. And yet, as I contend Weems’s images attest, such alternative possibilities among the enslaved and their generations of descendants—those deemed to occupy, as I noted in the previous chapter, a chaotic, irrational, “ungeographic” exteriority against which the spatial logics of the white subject is defined—certainly existed. Moreover, the existence of these alternatives has religious significance. Weems’s visual account of the collaborative, open orientation towards nature vis-à-vis the regulated self-containment of the subject offers a delineation of what I contend is black religion’s definitive concern: to offer a point of possibility for complex, open, ever-shifting ways of being that exceed the regulating social and, in this case, spatial logics of dominant society and its prescribed ontologies.

\textsuperscript{456} Morgan, 3.
\textsuperscript{457} Ibid.
5.2. Pure Nature and the Conventions of Landscape Representation

Before further delineating the depiction of the intermingling relationship between nature and humanity in *Sea Island Series*, it is necessary to first consider the work in the context of landscape photography. Importantly, landscape as a subject of visual representation is a distinctly modern phenomenon that first gained momentum and prestige through painting in the 17th and 18th centuries. The gradual distancing from the land that resulted from increased urbanization and industrialization, Wells contends, contributed to growing public desire for representations of “land in itself.” Wells’s emphasis here is significant; it signals what W. J. T. Mitchell and Deborah Bright identify as the way in which landscape as a form of representation has historically been premised upon the idea of nature as pure, timeless and unsullied by human intervention.

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458 There are two definitions of “landscape” at work in this chapter, both drawn from and informed by the work of Mark Dorrian and Gillian Rose: 1) a set of representational practices that involve the depiction of place through words, sounds or visual images and 2) everyday experiences and practices that are situated within the relationship between people and geography (nature and the built environment). See Mark Dorrian and Gillian Rose, eds. *Landscapes and Politics* (New York: Black Dog Publishing, 2003). In my discussion here of landscape photography, I use the term in reference to forms of visual representation. Yet, I also use the term in instances throughout the chapter to refer to experiences and practices of people in relation to nature.
460 Wells, 22.
intervention. More specifically, Mitchell asserts, the history of landscape painting is posited as a quest not only for transparent representations of nature, but as an effort toward “pure painting, freed of literary concerns and representation.” Mitchell writes, “on the one hand, the goal is nonrepresentational painting, freed of reference, language and subject matter; on the other hand, pure hyperrepresentational painting, a superlikeness that produces ‘natural representations of nature.’”

Central to this emphasis on the purity of nature was the distinct separation of nature and the human subject. This often involved, for instance, concealing in the painting the workers who labored the land in order to facilitate and preserve philosophical contemplation of natural beauty. Landscape painting sought to represent an “ideal estate” rather than “real estate,” such that it erased signs of the constructive human activity involved in the formation of landscape. Thus, at work in this approach, Mitchell contends, was an effort to break with convention, with language, with textuality in order to “produce an art that conceals its own artifice, to imagine a representation that ‘breaks through’ representation into the realm of the nonhuman.”

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461 Mitchell, 13. Bright, 125, 130.
462 Mitchell, 13. Citing the work of Kenneth Clark, Mitchell notes that this emphasis in landscape on “pure painting” was part and parcel of the modern trend away from “imitation” as a primary approach to artistic rendering. See Kenneth Clark, Landscape into Art (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1963).
463 Ibid.
464 Ibid, 15.
465 Ibid, 16.
466 Ibid, 16-17.
Bright’s analysis of the particular development of landscape photography in the context of the United States evidences the persistent emphasis on conceptions of nature as a pure and timeless.\textsuperscript{467} This conception had its beginnings in the late 19\textsuperscript{th} century when, according to Bright, a “Cult of Wild Nature” flourished in the U.S. This was characterized by a sense of nostalgia for the bygone pioneer life. The period saw increased efforts to create landscaped parks and forest preserves in and around cities, which cultivated “a taste for aestheticized nature.”\textsuperscript{468} In this context, nature and the wilderness came to be known as a type of “refuge of timeless order in a changing world.”\textsuperscript{469} While the prevailing landscape aesthetic in museum and gallery photography was established as an offshoot of the American purist/precisionist movement of the 1920s and 1930s, there was also the influential presence of the West Coast landscape school, which was popularized by photographers such as Ansel Adams.\textsuperscript{470} This school was significantly informed by 19\textsuperscript{th} century European and American “picturesque sublime” images and was notable for its representations that linked the American landscape with a mythical Eden.\textsuperscript{471} The beach and desert landscapes on the west coast in particular was

\textsuperscript{467} Bright, 125, 127.
\textsuperscript{468} Ibid, 127.
\textsuperscript{469} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{470} Ibid, 129.
\textsuperscript{471} Ibid. According to Bright, the association with the purity and mythos of Eden was fitting for the conservative social climate of the time period of post-World War II of the country. This climate was one that promoted the notion of Manifest Destiny as the country became a world superpower. Bright’s reference to the “picturesque sublime” here appears to be an amalgamation of two of the aesthetic categories in which landscape images of the natural world were
associated with a notion of untarnished nature where one could seek retreat without technological intervention or disruption.\textsuperscript{472} Nevertheless, according to Bright, even as landscape photography was part of the larger national promotion of nature as a space of retreat, it still promulgated not only a “sanitized conception of the natural world,” but more specifically, it posited nature as transcending historical context and human action.\textsuperscript{473}

Here, she notes for instance, the more recent 1975 exhibition and catalogue entitled \textit{New Topographies: Photographs of Man-altered Landscape} organized by William Jenkins. In describing the exhibition, which included landscape images by nine photographers, Jenkins pointed out that the photographs are intentionally about form and what is in front of the camera lens. The works, he insisted, were “above all an aesthetic arrangement, having nothing to do with the cultural meaning of those references.”\textsuperscript{474} To

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\textsuperscript{472} Ibid, 129. Bright notes that this particular emphasis on the western landscape was certainly informed by the advent of motion pictures and the medium’s representational associations of the West with spectacular scenery.
\textsuperscript{473} Ibid, 139.
\textsuperscript{474} Ibid, 131.
\end{flushright}
ensure that this was the case, markers of the larger context in which the images were taken were left out of the photographs and the captions that accompanied them.\textsuperscript{475} One of the images that appeared in the series was a part of a collection of photographs of small-town and suburban landscapes by Stephen Shore. The image depicted a small Dutch colonial style cottage in a manicured suburban setting. The caption that accompanied it was striking in its brevity: “West Avenue, Great Barrington, Massachusetts, 1974.”\textsuperscript{476} According to Bright, the caption is indicative of modernist premise that photographers do not take pictures of things or events, “but rather makes pictures to see forms in flat arrangements with their own internal coherence.”\textsuperscript{477} To signal or reference the world outside of the photographic frame, she furthers, was considered superfluous, if not altogether distracting.\textsuperscript{478} And yet, Bright, like Mitchell, challenges this presupposition at work in landscape. That is, she contends that emphasizing form of a photograph over against the contextual elements of its depictions is a faulty endeavor; there is no form without representation.\textsuperscript{479} More specifically, “formal orders are human arrangements and perceptions, not given essences.”\textsuperscript{480} Thus, the formal choices in landscape representations, even those images that appear to be straight-forward, transparent depictions of suburban landscapes and built environments, are charged with meanings.

\textsuperscript{475} Ibid, 133.  
\textsuperscript{476} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{477} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{478} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{479} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{480} Ibid.
that stem from race, class, gender and personal histories of the photographer, which is then transmitted to the audience.\textsuperscript{481} Ultimately, at stake here is the way in which landscape and its underlying distinctions between nature and human beings traffic in the notion that this particular approach to photography is an apolitical, “open field of ideological neutrality.”\textsuperscript{482} Landscape representations are a historical construction, Bright contends. In other words, rather than maintaining an immutable essence that is distinct from social context, landscape photographs are records of the material facts of our social reality and human values and what we have made of them.\textsuperscript{483} Thus, more than pure personal expression or aesthetic form, landscapes are a reflection of collective interests and influences.\textsuperscript{484}

Bright’s analysis, along with that proffered by Mitchell, informs my understanding of the distinctiveness of Weems’s images of lowcountry landscapes in the context of landscape photography. In particular, in contrast to the notions of pure, transparent nature untarnished by human action and context that has historically attended ideas of landscape, the \textit{Sea Island Series} does not conceal human activity. Rather, as I will delineate, through depictions of the landscape that demonstrate mutual entanglement and overlap between nature and humanity, the series foregrounds what Bright identifies as the social stakes of landscape photography. That is, the capacity of representations of

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{481} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{482} Ibid, 140.
\textsuperscript{483} Ibid, 126.
\textsuperscript{484} Ibid, 140.
\end{footnotesize}
the landscape and the environment to render and say something of the historical and collective realities, values and interests at work in black life and the wider social world.

Before turning my attention to the *Sea Island Series*, it is necessary to note that Weems is of course not alone in foregrounding the historical and social realities at work in representations of landscape, particularly in relation to black life. In addition to works by Ingrid Pollard and Nona Faustine, both of whom were discussed in previous chapters, Sally Mann’s arresting images of rural southern landscapes in the United States bear resonances in topic matter with the *Sea Island Series*. Despite these resonances, however, Mann’s images traffic in a particularly troubling and problematic conception of black people in relation to geography and spatial landscapes. A brief delineation of the conception here will provide a useful frame of reference in which to articulate why Weems’s rendering of the southern landscape of the lowcountry is so critical.

Mann’s first major retrospective of her work, entitled *Sally Mann: A Thousand Crossings* (2018), explores notions of memory, race, desire, death and familial bonds in the context of the South. In addition to images of her own young children in her native Virginia, the exhibition also includes images from Mann’s travels throughout the deep South, including Louisiana and Mississippi. In this collection of images in particular, Mann interrogates the ideas and realities of race and racial violence that are indelibly tied

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to southern land and geographies. Among the images are a series of photographs she took in 1998 that address the heinous murder of Emmett Till. As she traveled through Mississippi, Mann captured landscapes that Till’s murderers presumably would have seen in the days and hours before Till was killed in August 1955. The black-and-white, gothic-tinged images have a devastating, yet eerily haunting quality that is no doubt exacerbated by the absence of people in them. One image in particular, “Deep South, Untitled (Bridge on Tallahatchie),” depicts the bridge from which it is said that Till was hurled to his death. In his review of the work, James Gibbons notes the chemical streak on the photograph that signals that “there is something more to grapple with than the placid, almost Pictorialist tableau” that is the landscape image. Mann’s work here is a forceful commentary on the violent, racialized dimensions and context at work in southern landscapes. Perhaps signaling the artist’s departure from early conventions of landscape photography, Hilton Als aptly notes that “Mann does not rearrange the fact of the earth in her work, but she doesn’t turn away from the death that lies in it either.” In another set of images, Mann captures southern black churches in the remote rural regions of Virginia, Georgia and Louisiana. The gleaming white clapboard structures seem to

487 Ibid, 3.
insist on themselves among the overgrown trees, Spanish moss and other foliage that surrounds them. Indeed, as Als notes, up against the “monstrous” southern landscape, the structures appear like “shelters built on complicated ground.”

These images in which Mann interrogates the racial violence embedded within the very soil of the South offers necessary, but no doubt searing contemplations on the way in which the southern landscape is, to draw from McKittrick, a terrain of domination. And yet, when juxtaposed with the images of her family in the same exhibition, Mann’s photographs are also suggestive of a somewhat short-sighted characterization of the relationship of black life to nature and spatial geographies. The images of Mann’s young children depict them immersed in the wild, rustic expansiveness of the rural Virginia countryside. There is an intimate, unselfconscious sense of belonging that pervades the images. That is, Mann’s children do not merely explore and play in this countryside; they inhabit it. As Gibbons notes, they are so connected to this natural world that they appear “to wear” the smudges of dirt on their skin “like offhand adornments.” If the exhibition of Mann’s work posits that the rural southern landscape is a violent, monstrous terrain of domination for black southerners, it situates this same landscape as a lush wonderland of

489 Ibid.
490 Gibbons, 2. Mann initially received significant backlash for these depictions of her children. Some of them depict the children nude, injured, or, in some cases, engaged in what was considered inappropriate activity for their age, such as smoking a cigarette. In response to the images, Mann was accused of exploitation and child pornography. For Mann, the images were natural, intimate images of children through the eyes of their mother from a range of perspectives in their young lives.
imagination for Mann’s white children. Although such a representation is certainly valid, it is only partially so. That is, the risk in this hard-and-fast juxtaposition, whether it is an intentional one or not, is that it contributes to propagating the notion that black folks are “ungeographic.” Here again, I recall my discussion from the previous chapter: this notion of the ungeographic is premised upon what McKittrick identifies as the way in which the discipline of human geography and traditional space patterns strategically define and arrange the world from a unitary, white vantage point that leaves black communities out or that posits them as merely inconsequential objects in geographic considerations and investigations.\textsuperscript{491} The geographic knowledges of these communities and their meaningful relationships with space are cast as nonexistent, marginal or subordinate.\textsuperscript{492} In other words, spatial logics and geographies \emph{happen} to black folks. While black folks are impacted by spatial logics and geographies, rarely are they situated as active participants in engaging and producing them. This dynamic is evident in the aforementioned critical pieces written about Mann’s exhibition. For Mann’s children, the rural landscape is a “bewitching” space where they “embark on slow, languorous, and imaginatively rich exploration of their emerging beings.”\textsuperscript{493} Yet, the black churches located in the ominous and threatening landscape of the southern wilderness are refuges where black folks

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\textsuperscript{491} McKittrick, 11.
\textsuperscript{492} Ibid, 9.
\textsuperscript{493} Gibbons, 2.
“aspired to survive.” The children are consults of the southern landscape. Black folks endure its nightmares. In this sobering exhibition, their sense of geographic engagement is perhaps beside the point.

But is there more that can potentially be said concerning blackness, southern landscapes and geography? That is, in line with my concept of appositional black aesthetics and its concern with the complex nuances, creative improvisations and alternative social and relational logics that attend black social life, what kinds of black geographic engagements and knowledges exist in and beyond notions of terror and domination? While Mann’s work exposes the violent racialized brutality of southern landscapes, it also sidesteps, if not forecloses together, the possibility of black geographic engagement within this landscape. The *Sea Island Series*, however, suggests otherwise. In her effort to interrogate the question of how black people construct the spaces they inhabit and make it work for them even when it is not meant to, Weems provides a

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494 Als, “The Color of Humanity in Sally Mann’s South.” The *A Thousand Crossings* exhibition also includes two series of images of black people. In one series, Mann turns her camera lens to Virginia Carter, a black domestic who worked for Mann’s family. According to Gibbons, Mann’s images of Carter are in homage to the woman the photographer considered “the best mother a child could want” and are part of Mann’s effort to rectify a blind spot. Prior to these images, neither she nor her family had considered the complexities and realities of Carter’s life. In another series of images, entitled *Men*, Mann focuses on black men in South. She considers the work to be an exploration of the men who she encountered while growing up, but “never really saw, never really knew.” Although the images of Carter and the black men were taken in the South, the southern landscape that figures prominently in other images in the exhibition are noticeably absent. The close-up shots of the black figures do not foreground a sense of place or geography.
stunning account of black people as geographic beings who are actively engaged in lowcountry landscapes. It is in this way, I argue that the work has religious significance. Through its depiction of landscapes that evidence an open, interconnected engagement between humanity and the lowcountry natural world, the *Sea Island Series* upends and troubles conceptions of a self-contained subject that maintains dominion over the natural world. Thus, the work visually demonstrates my conception of black religion; it depicts more expansive ways of being that exceed the regulating social and, in this case, spatial logics of dominant society and its prescribed ontologies.

### 5.3. Interconnections of Nature and Humanity

Within black literature and film, the region in and around the South Carolina and Georgia lowcountry is characteristically represented as an extraordinary terrain where black people and the natural world meet. In her 1982 novel, *Sassafrass, Cypress and Indigo*, Ntozake Shange tells the story of three sisters from Charleston, South Carolina. While the two older sisters, Sassafrass and Cypress, each embark on their own respective journeys away from the region, the youngest child, Indigo, remains in Charleston with a special connection to the land, nature and the cultural practices premised upon them. In a description of eclectic Indigo, she is said to have “the South in her”:

> The South in her, the land and salt-winds, moved her through Charleston’s streets as if she were a mobile sapling, with the gait of a well-loved colored woman whose lover was the horizon in any direction. Indigo imagined tough winding branches growing from her braids, deep green leaves rustling by her ears, doves and macaws flirting above the nests they’d fashioned in
the secret, protected niches way high up in her headdress...She made herself, her world, from all that she came from.\footnote{Ntozake Shange, \textit{Sassafrass, Cypress and Inigo} (New York: Picador, 1982), 4.}

In her attention to Shange’s vibrant literary depiction of the lowcountry, Kimberly Ruffin notes that Indigo’s fusion of self and place, wherein she is described as a “fantastical and sensual merging of human being and environment,” reflects the sense that the southern natural world is imbued with particular force and magic that is seamlessly enmeshed within its inhabitants.\footnote{Kimberly R. Ruffin, “A Realm of Monuments and Water: Lorde-ian Erotics and Shange’s African Diaspora Cosmopolitanism” in Katherine McKittrick and Clyde Woods, eds. \textit{Black Geographies and the Politics of Place} (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 2007), 146.} Filmmaker Julie Dash depicts the region as having a similar quality in her seminal 1991 film \textit{Daughters of the Dust}. The film focuses on the Peazant Family, whose members have lived on Ibo Landing, one of the Sea Islands, for generations, as some of them prepare to migrate to the mainland and north.\footnote{“Ibo Landing” is not an actual barrier island in the Sea Islands. The name is a reference to a mythical site of resistance against slavery in the Sea Islands. I elaborate upon the myth further below in this chapter. In her attention to the film, Wardi points out that Dash chose the name because of the great significance of the myth to the Gullah people. In an interview with bell hooks, Dash went on to explain that almost every sea island she visited while filming \textit{Daughters of the Dust} had an inlet or area in which people claimed was Ibo Landing, the site of the myth. See Wardi, 48. See also Julie Dash, “Dialogue: Between bell hooks and Julie Dash” in Julie Dash, et. al \textit{Daughters of the Dust: The Making of an African American Woman’s Film} (New York: New Press, 1992), 27-67.} While the film centers on various family members as they grapple with the complexities of leaving the island, the lowcountry landscape figures prominently in the film. As Judith \footnote{496 Filmmaker Julie Dash depicts the region as having a similar quality in her seminal 1991 film \textit{Daughters of the Dust}. The film focuses on the Peazant Family, whose members have lived on Ibo Landing, one of the Sea Islands, for generations, as some of them prepare to migrate to the mainland and north.\footnote{“Ibo Landing” is not an actual barrier island in the Sea Islands. The name is a reference to a mythical site of resistance against slavery in the Sea Islands. I elaborate upon the myth further below in this chapter. In her attention to the film, Wardi points out that Dash chose the name because of the great significance of the myth to the Gullah people. In an interview with bell hooks, Dash went on to explain that almost every sea island she visited while filming \textit{Daughters of the Dust} had an inlet or area in which people claimed was Ibo Landing, the site of the myth. See Wardi, 48. See also Julie Dash, “Dialogue: Between bell hooks and Julie Dash” in Julie Dash, et. al \textit{Daughters of the Dust: The Making of an African American Woman’s Film} (New York: New Press, 1992), 27-67.}
Weisenfeld aptly notes in her attention to *Daughters of the Dust*, the landscape “appears as a fully drawn character as a result of the strikingly beautiful tracking shots that sweep the viewer across the beach and follow the human characters as they move through the cemetery, the fields and along the beach.”498 Members of the family, particularly its eldest member, Nana Peazant, are depicted as they commune and consult with nature and artifacts made from it that are understood as conduits for their ancestors. For Nana Peazant, the family’s history is too deeply connected to the island to leave it, thus she refuses to join her family in their migratory move. In a scene in which the women of the family gather around Nana Peazant on the sandy beach, she recalls the ancestral journey through the Middle Passage and, in a way that further conveys their deep connection to the natural world, she admonishes them, “We are from the sea. There is saltwater in our blood.”499

In Weems’s 1991 *Sea Island Series*, the artist provides yet another rich depiction of the indelible connection between the region’s black inhabitants and the natural world in what was a decade that saw a resurgence of interest in the lowcountry.500 Yet, while

500 Rebecca Lee Reynolds cites *Sea Island Series* and *Daughters of the Dust*, both completed in 1991, as evidence of a type of “renaissance” of Gullah-Geechee culture in the 1990s. However, the publications of both Shange’s *Sassafrass, Cypress and Indigo*
the references above from *Sassafrass, Cypress and Indigo* and *Daughters of the Dust* are indicative of the way in which the natural world was conceived as deeply embedded in embodied existence (i.e., Indigo’s imaginings of the winding branches that were an extension of her braids and Nana Peazant’s claim that the sea is in the blood of the Peazant family), Weems’s series, absent of black bodies, conceives of black embodied presence and their histories as part and parcel of the natural world. Two images from the series, with a text panel placed between them, provides an instructive example of this. As noted above, some of the landscape images in *Sea Island Series* are accompanied by text panels that provide further context for the world in and beyond the photographic frame to which the images reference. The images in question depict what appears to be a swampy area or marshland. Dense with vegetation, the areas are seemingly treacherous and impassable. The text panel that accompanies them recounts the folkloric myth of Ebo Landing. According to the myth, Nigerian Ebo men were transported through the Middle Passage and brought to the Sea Islands to be sold into slavery. Upon their arrival, they resisted by walking back into the ocean and drowning themselves.501 In Weems’s version of the myth included in the text panel, it reads:

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501 Rebecca Lynn Reynolds, “Carrie Mae Weems Mines Gullah Geechee Culture in Savannah.”
One midnight at high tide a ship bringing a cargo of Ebo (Ibo) men landed at Dunbar Creek on the island of St. Simons. But the men refused to be sold into slavery; joining hands together they turned back toward the water, chanting ‘the water brought us, the water will take us away.’ They all drowned, but to this day when the breeze sighs over the marshes and through the trees, you can hear the clank of chains and echo of their chant at Ebo Landing.502

Weems’s account of the myth in the text panels is significant. Through its inclusion in the work, it becomes clear that there is more at work in the landscape depiction of the marshland than meets the eye. Rather than a transparent image of nature, the marshland is conceived as a space in which the ancestors dwell. Wardi’s work in African American ecocriticism provides an instructive reference point from which to expound upon the additional nuance offered by this text panel concerning the stakes of the landscape.

African American ecocriticism posits that literature and the verbal arts, including folklore and oral history, are critical to understanding how black people engage ecology.503 Language and the verbal arts has provided a tool in which African Americans

502 Carrie Mae Weems, Sea Island Series (1991). While Weems’s account of the Ebo Landing myth indicates that the Ebo drowned, other accounts of the myth indicate that they walked on water back to Africa; still others indicate that they flew across the water or swam. See Wardi, 47.
503 Kimberly Ruffin, Black on Earth: African American Ecoliterary Traditions (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 2010), 12-14. In her argument concerning the need to reclaim an “African American ecological vision, Ruffin contends that it is necessary to include folklore and oral history in addition to traditional literary texts.
posit imaginative, complex relationships between humans and the natural world “despite the social scripts that have denied their authority to do so.” In her ecocritical work, Wardi brings together race, the biophysical environment and the African American literary imagination to consider what she identifies as the central trope of water in African American literary and historical traditions. More specifically, she contends, within African American literary traditions, bodies of water are portrayed as “embodied sites where memory and history and converge.” This very convergence is at work in the text panel in Weems’s *Sea Island Series* that recalls the myth of Ebo Landing. In accompanying the landscape images of the marshland with the textual account of the myth, the marshland becomes “ancestrally embodied,” such that the very physical geography of the landscape is imprinted with a particular cultural history. When one returns to the marshland and listens to the breeze, according to myth, they are susceptible to hearing the Ebo ancestors who are said to have drowned in its waters. Weems’s landscape image is thus not one that depicts the natural world as “pure” and untainted by historical context; this representation foregrounds the way in which the marshland area is considered, rather, as geographic “repository of history.” This conceptualization of the

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504 Wardi, 3.
505 Ibid, 6. Wardi gives particular attention to the predominance of references to the Middle Passage and the Atlantic Ocean in African American literary and cultural history.
506 Wardi, 35, 47.
507 Ibid, 49. In noting the way in which the land, water and the natural world are embedded with ancestral history and memory, Wardi notes the biophysical aspects of water to point out that this history and memory also includes the violence and degradation of the Middle Passage and enslavement.
marshlands as a natural source from which to interface with the ancestors and historical memory is on par with studies that link the lowcountry region and its approach to the natural world with West and Central African beliefs and practices.\textsuperscript{508} In his work on what he contends is the “composite African-Lowcountry cultural tradition” that resulted from the influx of West-Central Africans brought to the region during the slave trade, Ras Michael Brown notes the significance of the forest and its wetlands to enslaved lowcountry inhabitants.\textsuperscript{509} Distinct from plantation society and its social mores and


\textsuperscript{509} Brown, 294. Brown contends that the vast majority Africans brought to the lowcountry came from West-Central cultures that saw the land as an essential link between the living and the Creator, the ancestors and nature spirits. Here, he presents statistical data that indicates that throughout the duration of the slave trade, African people from West-Central Africa arrived in the lowcountry in such large numbers that they formed one of the largest populations in the region. Their cultures included the Bambara, Mende, Akan, and the Igbo/Kongo, all of whom interacted with the natural world according to a body of beliefs and practices that were believed health and prosperity as well continued contact with “the invisible powers.” Importantly, according to Brown, members of these cultures who arrived in the region did not simply or seamlessly blend their particular traditions and beliefs “indiscriminately” into a “general” African worldview. Instead, each culture and tradition made specific contributions to the development of what would become a composite system of beliefs and traditions. Brown traces evidence of African retentions within conceptions of the relationship between human beings and nature through an interpretation of words and meanings of African origin that were used in the region. In contrast to some historians who tend to dismiss the existence of these words in lowcountry speech as “isolated survivals,” Brown contends
logics, the wilderness was widely conceived as the shelter and inhabited space of the ancestors and other ethereal entities. These entities included territorial nature spirits, considered beneficent forces behind growth and prosperity, that inhabited not only trees and rocks, but also bodies of water. According to Brown and as Weems’s reference to the Ebo Landing myth indicates, the landscape was understood as potent force where enslaved lowcountry inhabitants and their descendants “retained contact with the dead and reaffirmed their own ties to the land.”

The references made by Wardi and Brown concerning the distinctiveness of lowcountry marshlands and wilderness from the conventions and mores of plantation society provides yet another register through which to consider the significance of Weems’s images of the marshlands and what they suggest in addition to the ancestral presence embedded within their natural elements. Although marshlands and swamps were part of plantation grounds, these uncultivated, threatening and seemingly

that were not just random vocabulary choices; the also likely performed a particular kind of cultural work. Here he notes, for example, the coexistence of African lexical terms for nature alongside English terms with similar meaning. One of his informants, called “Gullah Joe,” had a significant grasp of the English language, but insisted on using the term “feenda,” instead of the English translation, “forest.” Brown surmises, that “only feenda could express the full breadth of meaning that Gullah Joe wished to convey. The fact that ‘feenda’ appeared in 20th century folklore untranslated by the narrator further demonstrates the continued resonance of the word in lowcountry speech.” Such terms were communicated by African forebears to their children, who then passed it down through the generations, signaling a connection between West-Central African conceptions of natural world and those of the lowcountry.


Ibid.

Ibid.
unnavigable areas compromised the order, logics and hegemony of the plantation and was thus a source of social anxiety among whites.\textsuperscript{513} On one level, the anxiety and disruption caused by swamps and marshlands came as a result of the way in which they posed an ecological threat to taxonomies and ontological distinctions between human subjects and the natural world. In her study of swamps and marshlands in the 18\textsuperscript{th} century plantation zone, Monique Allewaert identifies this ecological threat in the travel narratives of William Bartram.\textsuperscript{514} According to Allewaert, in these narratives, in which Bartram recounts his travels through the marshlands that flow through the Georgia sea islands and connect them to the mainland, Bartram contends that human beings are in peril in the marshland, such that they are at risk of being taken over by the vegetation life.\textsuperscript{515} His accounts reflect the sense that humans become deeply intertwined with and determined in part by the natural elements: the heat that changes the orientation and movement of the human body, the diseases that are thought to be carried in the climate, and the bites from insects and snakes, all of these “compromised bodily and metaphysical integrity.”\textsuperscript{516} Allewaert surmises, “bodies so penetrated could not be diffused into singular yet abstract corpses…they were pulled instead into the sprawling (and

\textsuperscript{513} Wardi, 97. Allewaert, 343.
\textsuperscript{514} Allewaert, 341. Allewaert defines “plantation zone” as “a space that is tropical or subtropical and whose economy and political structures are shaped by the plantation form.”
\textsuperscript{515} Ibid, 343.
\textsuperscript{516} Ibid.
overlapping) biological, economic, and social systems of the plantation zone.”

Throughout his five-year journey through the marsh, Bartram also commented on “manifest agency” of the vegetation. Commenting on the Venus flytrap, he observed that plants, like humans and animals, were endowed with faculties of motion and volition. The same was true of tree vines that he noted had the capacity to lean, extend and, “like the fingers of a human hand, catch hold of what is nearest.”

For Allewaert, the narratives attest to how the vegetation life and natural world of the lowcountry marshland could permanently transform and change human habitations, bodies, and patterns of thought. In this way, she notes, it presented a space that fundamentally disrupted the basic assumptions of Enlightenment naturalism: that the subject stands apart from the object world that he or she would master. The wilderness was a space where the objective and the subjective converged, making a clearly demarcated human subjectivity difficult to maintain, if not impossible. Herein was one of the sources of anxiety concerning the marshland for plantation society, according to Allewaert. In marshland areas of the lowcountry, white travelers and plantation owners could not gain firm

\[\text{\textsuperscript{517} Ibid.}\]
\[\text{\textsuperscript{518} Ibid, 344. Allewaert draws her analysis from the publication of Bartram travel narratives in William Bartram, \textit{Travels through North and South Carolina, Georgia, East and West Florida, the Cherokee Country, the Extensive Territories of the Muscogulges or Creek} (New York: Library of America, 1996).}\]
\[\text{\textsuperscript{519} Ibid.}\]
\[\text{\textsuperscript{520} Ibid, 345.}\]
enough ground to sustain conceptions of their absolute control and dominion over nature and property.\textsuperscript{521}

Weems’s inclusion of landscape images of the particularly wild, dense marshland thus signals not only the ancestral presence embedded in the lowcountry natural world, but also a landscape that confounds the regulating ontological conventions of 18\textsuperscript{th} century plantation social logics that distinguished the human subject from the natural world. Importantly, however, the disruptions to ontological classification that the marshland presented was not the only source of anxiety concerning the landscape for whites. This landscape, considered a treacherous, foreign and threatening world to whites, was also the space inhabited by runaway enslaved men and women and maroon communities. As Wardi notes, the vast swampland, uncultivated and dangerous, “turned into the topography in which the body of the rebellious maroon was mapped.” To be sure, the association of the lowcountry marshland with fugitive black bodies signals dominant spatial logics that deem black people as occupants of the realm of incoherent, chaotic exteriority against which the self-contained coherence of the European subject is defined. Yet, the inclusion of the marshland landscape in the \textit{Sea Island Series} is an invitation to enter into this purportedly unnavigable landscape, this “undercommon appositionality,” as Fred Moten might call it.\textsuperscript{522} In ways that resonate with the descriptions of the

\textsuperscript{521} Ibid
\textsuperscript{522} Fred Moten, “Blackness and Nothingness (Mysticism in the Flesh)” \textit{The Southern Atlantic Quarterly} (Fall 2013), 756.
lowcountry marshlands posited by Wardi and Brown, Moten contends that blackness inhabits a space outside of the purview of dominant society and its ontological, categorical distinctions. While blackness may be deemed chaotic and pathological according to dominant logics, it is characterized by a “fleshly dispossession” that is “without reserve” and that exceeds efforts to calculate or grasp it according to regulating and prescribed ontologies.\textsuperscript{523} This appositional, fleshly dispossession is not be overcome or resisted, but “entered into” explored for its expansive possibility.\textsuperscript{524}

According to Allewaert, there was indeed possibility in the lowcountry marshland and it involved ecological practices in which fugitive enslaved persons engaged in a type of collaborative relationship with the natural world. It was “a process through which human agents found ways to interact with nonhuman forces and in so doing resisted the order of the plantation.”\textsuperscript{525} Not to be mistaken for anthropomorphism, this engagement was characterized by aligning themselves with the rhythm of the southern ecology. It involved “joining the human will to that of plants” in ways that produced geographic knowledges that informed human action.\textsuperscript{526} For instance, she notes, they developed an acumen for knowing which plants offered poisons and which offered food, they became familiar with the dark spots that provided shelter and concealment, and they knew that

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Ibid, 761. See also Moten, “The Case of Blackness” \textit{Criticism} 50 (Spring 2008), 177-218.
\item Ibid, 746.
\item Allewaert, 341.
\item Ibid, 344.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
areas of the swamp could be made into “motile, invisible structures.”

This kind of engagement in and through the landscape, Allewaert contends, is suggestive of a mode of agency that is not based in the categorical distinctions of subjectivity between human and nature, but rather human interaction with nonhuman forces that undermined the ontological and social order of the plantation.

This kind of interconnected, intertwining engagement between the natural environment and lowcountry inhabitants that produced ways of being that were constituted by collaboration with nature are evident in other images in the Sea Island Series beyond those that depict the marshland. These images attest to the way in which even beyond the period of slavery, the natural world of the lowcountry was, as Brown puts it, more than “a mere back drop of human endeavors or, at the other extreme, an essentially deterministic force.”

Descendants of enslaved Africans maintained perpetual interaction with nature in that it was a critical element in their beliefs around intentional, ritualistic interaction with their ancestors and unseen forces. In one triptych in particular, Weems captures headstones in a graveyard. Some of the headstones are noticeably adorned with plates and other objects. A text panel, entitled “Boneyard,” is included as part of the triptych and recounts folklore and instructions around death, burial and protection. One line in particular explains the adornment of headstones with plates:

Ibid, 353.
Ibid, 341.
Brown, 293.
Ibid.
“The last cup, plate and spoon used by the deceased should be placed on the grave.”

In his study of the influence of Kongo art and religion in the United States, Robert Farris Thompson identifies this tradition of adorning gravesites in the Sea Islands as a Kongo-influenced tradition that was premised upon the belief that the last strength of the dead is still present in the last objects of this type that were touched by the deceased. The practice of leaving the artifacts in natural areas of the gravesite was a way of placating the spirits who inhabited the natural world. That is, it satisfied and grounded the spirits and kept them from following their living relatives back home. In addition to plates, graves on the Sea Islands were also adorned with sea shells. In an interview with Thompson, Bessie Jones, an artist on St. Simons Island, Georgia, noted that the shells stand for the sea. In gravesite adornment, there is the belief that “the sea brought us, the sea shall take us back.” Similarly, plants and trees planted on graves were believed to

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532 Robert Farris Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy* (New York: Vintage Books, 1984), 134. Here, Thompson argues that art and spiritual philosophies of African civilizations survived the Middle Passage and fused with new cultural elements in the Americas, producing what he refers to as a “black Atlantic visual tradition.” Thomson makes an intervention into scholarship that draws cultural links between Africa and the West by identifying the specific African civilizations (Yoruba, Kongo, and Mande, for example) that influence specific art and philosophies in the Americas.
533 Ibid.
534 Ibid, 135.
535 Ibid.
link to the “otherworld.” In this way, nature was conceived as a mediating force between life and death, between the living and the dead.

Objects included on gravesites are not the only adornments in the lowcountry natural world. Weems’s images also depict trees garlanded with bottles and other glass vessels. In one particularly striking image, a mattress spring is extended between two trees. Both practices, according to Thompson, are Kongo-influenced and are said to ward off evil spirits and unwanted presences. Bottle trees, in particular, kept spirits from entering a home by luring them inside the bottles hanging from the trees, where they cannot get out again. Similarly, the series also includes images with hubcaps jutting from the ground or propped up against and nailed to trees. These adornments, Thompson notes, are not random or passive decorative choices. They symbolize “motion” and the belief that, when placed into the ground or on trees, they facilitate the removal of unwanted forces. For instance, in his research, Thompson observed a similar adornment of hubcaps and tires on an abandoned structure in Detroit. The neighbor who applied the objects did so to ward off criminal elements from his neighborhood,

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536 Ibid.
537 Ibid, 142.
538 Ibid, 144.
539 Robert Farris Thompson, “Bighearted Power: Kongo Presence in the Landscape and Art of Black America,” 44.
540 Ibid, 42.
541 Ibid, 43.
noting that, “curved space *spins*; I put something round on a square, on a house and make it go.” ⁵⁴²

Weems’s images that depict the use of objects applied to nature to placate and engage with ancestral spirits and other entities is another way in which the series demonstrates a type of intermingling and overlap between humanity and nature. Interfacing with nature plays a significant role in facilitating certain spiritual and cultural beliefs and traditions that inform the daily lives of lowcountry inhabitants.

**5.4. Conclusion**

Through its depictions of the lowcountry landscapes, Carrie Mae Weems’s *Sea Island Series* attests to the black geographic and spatial knowledges that exist and persist, to draw from McKittrick, in and alongside terrains of domination. What is significant for my purposes here is that through these depictions, the series provides a visual delineation of what I have argued throughout this project is the fundamental nature and meaning of black religion: it is the point of possibility for expansive ways of being that exceed the regulating social and spatial logics of dominant society and its prescribed ontologies. Weems’s depictions have black religious significance in that the landscapes reflect an alternative engagement between humanity and nature; rather than constituted by humanity’s dominion over and distinction from nature according to dominant logics of

⁵⁴² Ibid, 43-44.
the human subject, these images are suggestive of the lowcountry inhabitant’s sense of interconnection and boundedness with nature. The work thus demonstrates what Stein describes as a “human/natural amalgamation and collectivity that defies the appropriate bifurcation of subject and object” that is central to the “conquest imperative” that informs more dominant conceptions of humanity and its relationship to nature.
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