You Can't Keep a Good Woman Down:

The Representation of Black Womanhood in the Photography of Carrie Mae Weems

by

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1. Introduction

"She looks in a mirror at her plump brown and black body, crinkly hair and black eyes and decides, foolishly, that she is not beautiful."
(Alice Walker, *You Can't Keep a Good Woman Down* 1981:45)

"Daguerreotypes, Ambrotypes, Photographs and Electrotypes, good and bad, now adorn or disfigure all our dwellings. . . . Men of all conditions may see themselves as others see them. What was once the exclusive luxury of the rich and great is now within reach of all."
(Frederick Douglass "Pictures and Progress: An Address Delivered in Boston, Massachusetts, on 3 December 1861," in Wallace and Smith 2012:6)

In her 1971 collection of short stories titled *You Can't Keep a Good Woman Down*, Alice Walker illuminated Black[1] women's experiences, highlighting their constant struggle in a society which discriminates against them on the basis of gender and race. Through the creation and perpetuation of stereotypical images, Black women have been turned into mammies, jezebels and sapphires since the eighteenth century. Alice Walker is among a generation of Black feminists of the 1970s who set out to create corrective, counter-hegemonic images of Black womanhood. Working in a different medium but with the same intentions, photographer Carrie Mae Weems's body of work likewise tackles issues of Black women's oppressions while offering new, empowering images of Black womanhood.

In 1973, Carrie Mae Weems received her first camera as a birthday gift[2] and began photographing herself. Her photographs have since been displayed in museums nationally and internationally, providing counter-hegemonic images for Black women in the United States, whose images, for centuries, have been created *for* them, not *by* them. In the 2018 exhibition "We Wanted a Revolution: Black Radical Women, 1965–85" in Buffalo, New York (originally from the Brooklyn Museum), I first encountered Carrie Mae Weems and it prompted me to write my thesis on her work. After having seen her works at the exhibit in Buffalo, I was surprised by the lack of literature on Carrie Mae Weems. I saw an urgent need to write about her photography, since they tackle important issues. I chose her works out of interest, while also investigating my

[1] In this thesis, I will capitalize "Black", as is done by *The New York Times*. https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/05/insider/capitalized-black.html
[2] http://carriemaeweems.net/

own place as a white woman and feminist, seeing an opportunity to take a closer look at the complicated, racist history of (white) feminism.

In the following, I will discuss two series by Carrie Mae Weems: *Not Manet's Type* from 1997 and *The Kitchen Table Series* from 1990. In the first series, *Not Manet's Type*, Weems is referencing (feminist) art history, modernism and Western beauty ideologies. *The Kitchen Table Series* is concerned with film noir, the medium of photography, and the blues. On a macro-level, both series are confronting the harmful controlling images created by mainstream culture as well as establishing a counter-archive of the artistic reactions by Black women in photography, film, music and literature. At a closer look, each series tackles a specific medium and time in history which will be considered in my analysis. In her works, Weems is criticizing the stereotyping of Black women while also referencing Black women's techniques of resistance. I will a) read the photographs "against the grain" of racist and sexist representations of Black women and b) examine how the photographs are a site of *Black feminist thought*, comparing the series to the works of other Black feminist artists. In the following, I will argue that in her photographs, Carrie Mae Weems is critiquing the pervasive white, male gaze in art, photography and film, while creating positive representations of Black womanhood.

Using the medium of photography, Weems critiques the long history of oppression through that medium, as well as using photography's potential to work against prevailing stereotypes. In chapter two, "Representation, Stereotypes & Photography", I will discuss photography's complicity in the making of stereotypes, as well as examine the most common stereotypes. Photography plays a crucial role in the construction of stereotypes – invented by white men in the middle of the nineteenth century, photography from the early days was utilized to create the image of "the Other". Black women have been assigned three main stereotypes: The mammy, the jezebel and the sapphire. Essentially, Black women were and are paradoxically characterized as either hypersexual or asexual, as submissive or *too assertive*. The skin and hair of male and female Black people became the markers of their inferiority and served as the legitimization of enslaving and violating Black people due to the categorization as *inferior*. Photography served to allegedly prove racial inferiorities in the emerging pseudo-sciences of the nineteenth century.

Black women have always faced a double discrimination, as they were oppressed due to both their gender and their race, which critical race theory scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw famously

described as “intersectional discrimination” in 1989. In the third chapter, “Creating counter-hegemonic images”, I will give a brief overview of how photography, in its early days, was already used to create images that opposed the caricatures created by white photographers. Abolitionists Frederick Douglass and Sojourner B. Truth most prominently used their photographic portraits to campaign for equal rights. Another focus will be on the artistic production of the 1960s and 1970s which fought against the discrimination of Black people and women: The Black Arts movement and the feminist movement. Since Black women were oppressed in both movements, the 1970s, 80s and 90s saw the emergence of Black feminist thought. Black feminist critics such as Audre Lorde, Toni Cade Bambara, bell hooks, Patricia Hill Collins as well as Black feminist artists, filmmakers and writers, thematized Black women’s oppression in society. Weems’s works draw inspiration from both the Black Arts and women’s movement but above all, are a site of Black feminist thought since they also critically approach the problematic treatment of Black women within those movements.

In chapter four, I will analyze Weems’s series *Not Manet’s Type* (1997). The work consists of five self-portraits juxtaposed with text. In both image and text, Weems discusses the oppressive beauty ideologies and how they have been perpetuated specifically through the modernist art movement of the early twentieth century. Naming white male artists such as Picasso, Manet, and others, she points out how Black women have been fetishized and erased in Western art history. Yet, she offers a hopeful outlook: Through community, art, and criticism, Black women artists have been able to escape the confines of their limited roles within society. In order to place Weems in the larger context of Black feminist thought and art, I will compare *Not Manet’s Type* with other art works by Black feminist artists such as Howardena Pindell and Faith Ringgold, who likewise have criticized Black women’s exclusion from art-making and designation as objects.

The Kitchen Table Series, which will be examined in chapter five, is known as Weems’s most iconic work. Weems created the series over a period of time, mixing personal with fictional elements. The 20 photographs (accompanied by text panels) are sequences from a woman’s life: Her romantic relationships, her friendships, her ambitions, dreams, her quest for independence, and motherhood. The series was a response to Laura Mulvey’s seminal essay on the male gaze from 1975, and its erasure of the Black female spectator. In *The Kitchen Table Series*, Weems traces the racist history of photography and film and creates new images for Black womanhood,

using photography's potential to decolonize in the tradition of Frederick Douglass. I will also compare her work to the counter-cinema of Julie Dash, which places the Black female spectator as its subject, creating a Black female gaze in her works, similar to Weems's approach. In addition to the gaze, the texts of *The Kitchen Table Series* are inspired by the blues. The blues has offered another important technique of resistance for Black women. Throughout the accompanying texts, she mixes vernacular language with folklore, voicing the issues of Black women like early blues singers such as Bessie Smith and Gertrude "Ma" Rainey. Ultimately, "you can't keep a good woman down" – neither through photographs, films, nor paintings.

2. Representation, Stereotypes & Photography

Photography has been weaponized against people of color since its early days. Invented by two white European men, Louis Daguerre (1787-1851) and William Henry Fox Talbot (1800-1877), one of the premises of photography was to create a vision of other cultures like in the Middle East, perpetuating images of *Orientalism* (Behdad 2013:1): "The development of modern techniques of photography […] fueled a new exoticist desire for visual contact with the rest of the world" (Behdad 2013:2). The camera was a tool to "discover" the "Orient" which meant creating images of difference, fascination and fetishization. As Mark Sealy contends, photography was thus "tainted with ingrained racist ideologies" since its invention and photographing the "Other" became a "site of Western violence" (Sealy 2016: 2). Photography was instrumental in "the making of whiteness" (105). Photography's assumed neutrality was then used in the newly emerging pseudo-sciences of the nineteenth century in order to construct whiteness as the superior race. "Historical representations of African Americans in photography often begins with brutally clinical studies of black men and women, stripped for the camera as evidence of racial difference" (Doyle 2013:114).

However, as historians of photography such as John Tagg have pointed out, the technology of photography should be linked to ideology instead of some "emanation": "The photograph is not a magical 'emanation' but a material product of a material apparatus set to work in specific contexts, by specific forces, for more or less defined purposes" (Tagg 1988:3). In the second half of the nineteenth century new institutions emerged, such as prisons, asylums, hospitals, etc., which served to regulate societies (Tagg 1988:5). Documentary photography

"came to denote a discursive formation […] which appropriated photographic technology to a central and privileged place within its rhetoric of immediacy and truth" (Tagg 1988:8). Consequently, photographic "documentation" served the interests of those in power and positioned the "Other" as "passive but pathetic objects capable only of offering themselves up to a benevolent, transcendent gaze – the gaze of the camera and the gaze of the paternal state" (Tagg 1988:12). People of color were turned into categories and photography served as ideological tool, masked by an assumed neutrality.

In addition to the racist uses of photography, the technology of photography itself is based on ideas of whiteness. Sarah Lewis, Harvard professor and editor of the *Aperture* issue "Vision & Justice", examines the representation of African Americans in photography. In her article "Racial Bias and the Lens" she points out how there was an "unconscious bias […] built into photography" (Lewis 2019:54). Historically, light skin was the norm for developing photographs: "Photography is not just a system of calibrating light, but a technology of subjective decisions" (Lewis 2019:54). In order to develop color-film, a so-called "Shirley card" was required, which was an image of a white woman used by lab technicians "as the measuring stick against which they calibrated the colors" (Lewis 2019:54). In the 1990s, Kodak finally developed multiracial Shirley cards. However, "it took complaints from corporate furniture and chocolate manufacturers in the 1960s and 1970s for Kodak to start to fix color photography's bias" (Lewis 2019:54) – and not because they wanted to correct the bias against people of color.

With the invention of film, stereotypes of Black women were further perpetuated through mass media, solidifying their status. "Films are the mirror of the prevailing society. They are financed by corporations, which must pinpoint the tastes of the audience at all costs in order to make profit" (Kracauer 1995:291). Mainstream films have played instrumental roles in maintaining society's status quo. In his essay "The Little Shopgirls go to the Movies" from 1929, Siegfried Kracauer stresses the importance of questioning mainstream film's – and the ruling society's – intentions. The medium of film is bound to society and capitalism, and since "it is in the interest of the propertied classes to maintain society as it is, they must prevent others from thinking about that society" (Kracauer 1995:296). Kracauer's film criticism from the 1920s already highlights the purposes of mainstream films to support the ruling ideology and further supports that film must be understood in terms of keeping the social roles intact which is achieved through stereotyping. The importance of cinema in regard to race and gender cannot

be understated, as hooks argues: “The emphasis on film is so central because it, more than any other media experience, determines how blackness and black people are seen and how other groups will respond to us based on their relation to these constructed and consumed images” (hooks 1992:5). Furthermore, “we need to examine the representations and the ideologies about black women that circulate through cinematic images and the ways in which motion pictures uniquely frame them” (Francis in Callahan 2010:103).

The photographs of Black people taken by white people were dehumanizing and fetishizing. Film helped perpetuate stereotypes that prevail until today. In *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, Stuart Hall gives a thorough definition of stereotyping as a “racialized regime of representation” (Hall 1997:249). According to Hall, stereotyping “reduces people to a few, simple, essential characteristics, which are represented as fixed by Nature” (Hall 1997:257). It is “a signifying practice” and “central to the representation of racial difference” (257); it also “*deploys a strategy of ‘splitting’.* It divides the normal and the acceptable from the abnormal and the unacceptable” (258). Hall uses Foucault’s concept of “power/knowledge”, classifying some people as “normal” and excluding others (259). When talking about power, Hall clarifies that it must be understood in terms of Gramsci’s concept of hegemonic power (263). Power does not have to be obvious and brutal to be effective, and hegemonic power is defined as a “form of power based in leadership by a group in many fields of activity at once, so that its ascendancy commands widespread consent and appears natural and inevitable” (259). Black women especially were subjugated by stereotypes, facing not only the racism, but also sexism of white photographers. The most common stereotypes for Black women were developed during slavery: The mammy, the sapphire and the jezebel.

The stereotypes for Black women and men are all connected to sexuality. In *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), Frantz Fanon wrote about the sexualization of Black men: “For the majority of white men the Negro represents the sexual instinct (in its raw state)” (Fanon 2008:136). In regard to Black women, the epitome of nineteenth-century sexualization was the case of Sarah Baartman, the “Hottentot Venus”: “In the nineteenth century, the black female was widely perceived possessing not only a ‘primitive’ sexual appetite but also the external signs of this temperament – ‘primitive’ genitalia.” (Gilman 1985: 213). Gilman argues that in the eighteenth century, the sexuality of Black people, male and female “becomes an icon for deviant sexuality” (209). Gilman explores in his essay how the figure of the prostitute and the

figure of the Black woman were linked, creating a sexualized object: “Sarah Baartman's sexual parts, her genitalia and her buttocks, serve as the central image for the black female throughout the nineteenth century” (Gilman 1985: 216). This image prevails until today, and Black feminist scholars such as Patricia Hill Collins have explored the ways in which pornography is built on this basis: “The pornographic treatment of the bodies of enslaved African women and of women like Sarah Baartman has since developed into a full-scale industry” (Collins 2000:137). In regard to today’s mainstream culture, hooks stresses how contemporary films continue to stereotype Black women according to the opposing stereotypes of mammy and slut (hooks 1992:74).

The stereotype of the mammy is, according to Patricia Hill Collins, “the first controlling image applied to U.S. Black women […] the faithful, obedient domestic servant” (Collins 2000: 72). It was created to “justify the economic exploitation of house slaves and sustained to explain Black women’s long-standing restriction to domestic service” (72). The mammy functions symbolically to oppress Black women in terms of sexuality and motherhood: turning her into an asexual, childless woman, the mammy is depraved of her sexuality and motherhood. Her womanhood serves as “a dumping ground for those female functions a basically Puritan society could not confront” (Christian 1985 in Collins 2000:73). Hooks asserts that the mammy is “first and foremost asexual” as well as “fat (preferably obese […]” (hooks 2015:84). Her greatest virtue is that she loves and wants to serve white people (99). She is the “ultimate sexist-racist vision of ideal black womanhood – complete submission to the will of whites” (hooks 2015:84). From early portraits of the figure of the mammy holding white children in daguerreotypes, to present-day depictions of Aunt Jemima, the mammy stereotype has come a long way, “with Aunt Jemima created as a controlling image designed to hide Black women’s exploitation” (Collins 2000:40).

While the media shows Black mammy figures as “prototypes of acceptable black womanhood” (hooks 2015:85), her direct counterpart is the image of the jezebel. The jezebel embodies the American version of the European idea that Black women are sexually deviant, due to the lack of clothing worn by African women (Mitchell in Lewis et al 2016:55). The name *jezebel* is linked to *deceiver* and consequently means prostitute (55). The image was created to justify the raping of Black women and to legitimize sexual assault by white men (Boles in Lewis 2016:56). In addition, portraying Black women as having an excessive sexual appetite and

suppressing their ability to nurture and have children on their own, ultimately leads to an increased economic exploitation (Mitchell in Lewis 2000:72).

Another stereotype is the image of the sapphire. The sapphire takes "mammy's and jezebel's independent spirit to another level […]" (Lewis 2016:18), portraying her as an emasculating, masculine woman working on the fields: "As Sapphires, black women were depicted as evil, treacherous, bitchy, stubborn, and hateful, in short all that the mammy figure was not" (hooks 2015:100) The stereotypes were developed before and during slavery, however, they remain until today and "even as individual modern day female characters struggle through contemporaneous experiences, they also – in effect – struggle through that history, related to individual agency and erotic integrity" (Brown 2012:3).

3. Creating Counter-Hegemonic Images

> It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness, – an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder (Du Bois 2007:8).

In *The Souls of Black Folks* (1903), W.E.B. Du Bois coined the term "double-consciousness", addressing how the white dominant culture constructs images of Blackness, and how Black people struggle with the internalization of these images, feeling a "two-ness". Throughout history, Black artists, photographers, critics and filmmakers have fought against the flood of racist and sexist depictions, creating counter-hegemonic images in which Black people no longer have to see themselves "through the eyes of others". Similarly, feminist and Black feminist artists, authors, musicians and critics have attacked the images produced by the white, patriarchal dominant culture. In the following, I will discuss how photography was used in regard to decolonization and examine the strategies employed by Black, feminist, and Black feminist artists and critics (mainly from the 1960s onwards) who have created counter-hegemonic images using the visual arts.

3.1. Photography and Decolonization: A History of Black Photography

"Photography has been, and is, central to that aspect of decolonization that calls us back to the past and offers a way to reclaim and renew life-affirming bonds" (hooks 1995:55). As discussed the previous chapter, photography has been used to oppress people of color since it was invented in the nineteenth century. By exploiting the assumed neutral and documentary character of photography, the "Other" was depicted through the white imperialist gaze in a dehumanizing way. However, Black people have also self-authored their images (19). Photography was used by abolitionists such as Frederick Douglass and Sojourner B. Truth to counter these stereotypical images, using this exact assumed neutrality of the medium, turning it into an effective tool for self-representation: "For African Americans in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, photography became a method in which they could have control over their own representation" (Wood 2007:12).

Frederick Douglass and Sojourner B. Truth, during their lifetime, created numerous portraits of themselves. As hooks writes in *In Our Glory: Photography and Black Life*, "access and mass appeal have historically made photography a powerful location for the construction of the oppositional black aesthetic. The camera was the central instrument by which blacks could disprove representations of us created by white folks" (hooks 1995:59). Hooks describes how entering the homes of Black people inspires her: "Reflecting the way black folks looked at themselves in those private spaces, where those ways of looking were not being overseen by a white colonizing eye, a white supremacist gaze, these images created ruptures in our experience of the visual" (61). Frederick Douglass was among the first who utilized photography in order to empower himself and all Black people. In 1849, he wrote: "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" (Douglass quoted in Wexler in Wallace and Smith 2012:21). He held several lectures on photography[3] and sat for numerous portraits: "Douglass considered photography a weapon in his fight to become

[3] His lectures 'The Age of Pictures', 'Lecture on Pictures', 'Pictures and Progress', and 'Life Pictures' enthused over photography's social and epistemological potential" (Wallace and Smith 2012:5) ; "Douglass wrote on photography has not been widely read; much has not yet been published but remains in manuscript form in the Frederick Douglass Papers at the Library of Congress (Wexler in Wallace and Smith 2012:28).

a man despite his status as a slave" (Wexler in Wallace and Smith 2012:32) He also appreciated photography's accessibility: "The humblest servant girl may now possess a picture of herself such as the wealth of kings could not purchase fifty years ago" (Wallace and Smith 2012:6).

Cultural critic Roland Barthes, however, writes in *Camera Lucida* (1980) how being photographed means being turned into the "Other":

> Photography transformed subject into object, and even, one might say, into a museum object […] In terms of image-repertoire, the Photograph (the one I intend) represents the very subtle moment when, to tell the truth, I am neither subject nor object but a subject who feels he is becoming an object: I then experience a micro-version of death (a parenthesis): I am truly becoming a specter (Barthes 1981:13-14).

Barthes experienced becoming "the Other" through the photographic process. As Laura Wexler asserts in " 'A More Perfect Likeness': Frederick Douglass and the Image of the Nation", Barthes defines "three positions from which many critics today analyze the institutions of photography: that of the Operator of the camera, the Spectator of the photograph, and the Spectrum (or target) of the image" (Wexler in Wallace and Smith 2012:19). Douglass, an early theorist of photography, adds "a fourth position: that of the Revenant, or one who returns from the dead" (19). The word itself, revenant, "derives from the French *revenir* meaning 'to come back', 'to come again', 'to return'" (19). Douglass believed in a return from the social death of slavery through the medium of photography: "Douglass believed that the formerly enslaved could reverse the social death that defined slavery with another objectifying flash: this time creating a positive image of the social life of freedom" (19). *Camera Lucida* is a mediation on death and photography in terms of Barthes's individual, private grieving of the death of his mother, whereas Douglass talks about the "massive, public, and socially transformative" death of Black people due to enslavement (20). Barthes feels that through photography, he is becoming "Death in person; others – the Other […]", being turned into an object (30). However, as Wexler asserts, "for Douglass, the objectification of photography doubled back against his previous lack of a "political right to be a subject" (30). Being born a slave, Douglass already "experienced submission to slavery: as social death" (30). As Wexler writes, Barthes is alive and then "dies into his picture" (31). Douglass, on the other hand, as a formerly enslaved man, starts out as a "social corpse and is animated through the photograph" (31).

Another abolitionist who knew about the power of photography was Sojourner B. Truth. Through her speeches and her photographs, she demanded continuously: "Ain't I a Woman?" Truth was an illiterate former slave, who left no written records, "yet, during her lifetime and beyond, Truth forged an iconic identity in a print-laden world through various 'publications'" (Rohrbach in Wallace and Smith 2012:83). Selling *cartes de visites* was especially effective: "Emblazoned with the slogan, 'I Sell the Shadow to Support the Substance', Truth's photographs remain the most stable records of her efforts to intervene in a culture shifting from speech to writing and from image to text" (83). In the photographs (for example Figure 34), Truth constructs a very specific image of herself: "Dressed in the garb of Quaker womanhood, Sojourner Truth posed numerous times, arranging and perfecting her image according to many of the visual codes of the period" (88). Presenting herself with the visual signifiers of white womanhood (88), she created an image of a Black woman and former slave which stands against the stereotypical depictions of Black womanhood or its erasure altogether. She deconstructs the definition of womanhood "by using her own lived experiences to challenge it […] (Collins 2000:99). As Audre Lorde writes, "within this country where racial difference creates a constant, if unspoken, distortion of vision, Black women have on the one hand always been highly visible, and so, on the other hand, have been rendered invisible through the depersonalization of racism" (Lorde in Collins 2000:100). Photography was instrumental in Truth's endeavor. For one, being illiterate, it was a way to communicate without words. The medium of photography proved very effective, since it had and still has a claim to the truth[4], and by presenting herself as a dignified woman, they stood contrary to the assumptions that Black women are not human or feminine.

Subsequently, between 1900 and 1940, "African-American photographers flourished in businesses established in larger cities" (Willis 2000:35). Most prominently, Black photographers chronicled life in Harlem and the artists, writers, and singers of the Harlem Renaissance. James Van Der Zee was among the photographers who "captured the spirit and life of New York's Harlem for more than fifty years" (Willis 2000:42). In the 1940s, 50s and 1960s, photographers such as Gordon Parks and Roy DeCarava used photography to document

[4] Roland Barthes identifies the peculiar power of the photographic image, allowing that a photograph is 'somehow co-natural with its referent'; it retains a level of presence not necessitated by other referential systems" (Rohrbach in Wallace and Smith 2012:90).

life in Black communities in a positive light, creating "images of black folks embodying a spirit of abundance and plenty" (hooks 1995:67). DeCarava "endeavored to reframe the black image within a subversive politics of representation that challenged the logic of racist colonization and dehumanization" (67). In an interview in 1990, he states that creating a Black aesthetic in his photographs is a tool of communication and survival (DeCarava in Miller 1990:848). He argues that Black artists look at the world differently, as they have an agenda, which sets them apart from white European artists: "That agenda, at a minimum, is survival as an American. It is freedom, it is a humanitarian art that serves the needs of people" (Miller 1990:848). In the 1950s and 1960s, photography was still associated more closely with documentary photography and its attachment to the *truth* than with art, and Black photographers created images of "their individual communities and became interpreters of their own experiences" (Willis 2009:xxii).

In *Photography and Black Life*, hooks highlights the importance of photography, arguing that it is an essential tool to counter the flood of racist, sexist imagery in mainstream culture: "Cameras gave to black folks, irrespective of class, a means by which we could participate fully in the production of images" (hooks 1995:57). In the 1960s, photographs were crucial in regard to documenting the Civil Rights Movement, telling the story convincingly (Willis 2000:111). In the 1970s, at the time Carrie Mae Weems began to photograph, photography had moved on from mainly documentary purposes into the spheres of fine arts; university degrees in photography were offered, and Black photographers "explored and redefined the photographic image" (Willis 2000:171). In the following, I will examine the artistic movements of the 1960s onwards which have influenced the photography of Carrie Mae Weems.

3.2. Art Movements of the 1960s and 1970s: The Black Arts Movement and the feminist art movement

The Black Arts Movement was a site of resistance for Black people to create counter-hegemonic images. Prior to the Black Arts Movement, "very few African descendants were main subjects of American paintings" (Morgan 2019:5) and when they were painted, they were depicted merely as "subordinates of prosperous and powerful whites – slaves, servants, or picturesque peasants. In the popular arts they fared even worse" (Morgan 2019:5). In addition to the lack of positive representations, when a Black artist did succeed, he or she was labeled "Negro artist" (Morgan 2019:5). While there has been successful artistic output during the Harlem

Renaissance[5] most prominently, "their themes rarely addressed issues of the masses or engaged with working-class audiences, as would artists of the 1960s. Funding came primarily from white philanthropists" (Morgan 2019:5-6). Historically, Black people's art making has always been labeled inferior due to ideas about race which originated in Enlightenment and manifested themselves in the wide-held assumptions that non-white people were not able to "ever create formal literature, could ever master the 'arts and sciences'"(Gates 1992:72). Writing about the canon of literature, the "transparent decanter of Western values […]", Gates points out how the canon of "high art" subjugates "the voiceless, the invisible, the unrepresented, and the unrepresentable" (Gates 1992:35). Since "sublime genius" was reserved for white Europeans, Black people and people of color were not seen as being able to write (56). Among the prominent voices defending this thesis was Kant, who was among the "earliest major European philosophers to conflate 'color' with 'intelligence', a determining relation he posited with dictatorial surety" (6).

Black people's art has historically contested the "bombardment of negative, degrading stereotypes put forward by white supremacist ideologies" (Berger in Bernier 2008:5). The Black Arts Movement of the 1960s and 1970s specifically made it their mission to combine aesthetics with politics. The "official beginning" of the movement was the assassination of Malcom X in 1965 (Collins 2006; Neal 1968; Morgan 2019) and even before, a speech by Malcom X had caught the attention of Black artists: "We must recapture our heritage and our identity if we are ever to liberate ourselves from the bonds of white supremacy. We must launch a cultural revolution to unbrainwash an entire people" (Malcom X in Morgan 2019:4). The first artist credited with the launch of this "cultural revolution", the Black Arts Movement, was playwright and poet Amiri Baraka (Morgan 2019, Neal 1968). In his influential article "The Black Arts Movement" from 1968, critic Larry Neal outlines the influences, motivations and goals of the Black Arts Movement: "Black Art is the aesthetic and spiritual sister of the Black power concept" (Neal 1968:29), making the Black Art Movement the "cultural wing" of the Black Power Movement (Collins 2006:722). The movement "proposes a radical reordering of the

[5] In the 1920s and 30s, this 'black city' inspired prolific outpourings by artists, writers and musicians. They experimented with paint, sculpture, dance and music to capture the sorrows, joys, hardships and dreams of a new generation of urban African Americans (Bernier 2008:71).

cultural aesthetic" and "proposes a separate symbolism, mythology, critique, and iconology" (Neal 1968:29). Neal defines a "Black aesthetic", because accepting the white Western aesthetic means to "accept and validate a society that will not allow him to live" (30). The aim of the Black aesthetic is thus the "destruction of the white thing, the destruction of white ideas, and white ways of looking at the world" (30). As Neal concludes, the Black Arts Movement is an "ethical movement" – it is about reclaiming identity and creating works from the "viewpoint of the oppressed" (30). Ultimately, "The Black Arts Movement believes that your ethics and your aesthetics are one"(31).

Similar to the art production of Black artists and critics, feminist artists and critics were making art that shared revolutionary messages and set out to deconstruct the cultural hegemony. Important issues were the roles of women as a) artists and b) objects in art. Feminist art historian Linda Nochlin most prominently addresses the issue of the canon's exclusionary practices in regard to women in the arts: In her 1971 essay "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?", she points out how the white male viewpoint of art history has been accepted as the universal viewpoint while creating the "magical aura surrounding the representation arts and their creators […]" (Nochlin 2018:153). There have not been great women artists, because women were denied access, not because of some inferior quality based on gender. Nochlin was an early proponent of institutional critique, addressing the exclusionary practices of the gatekeepers of art history such as art schools and museums: "By stressing the institutional – that is, the public – rather than the individual, or private, preconditions for achievement or the lack of it in the arts, I have tried to provide a paradigm for the investigation of other areas in the field" (Nochlin 2018:176). In regard to the visual representation of women, feminist critics linked "the privileging of vision with sexual privilege" (Owens in Foster 1983:70). In 1973, feminist film critic Laura Mulvey examines the question of representation of women as objects on film, deconstructing the mechanisms at work, coining the "male gaze":

> In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that there can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness (Mulvey 2016:16).

Both women and Black people have been objectified in the arts, while their own artistic production has been deemed inferior due to some biological essentialism. In "Activists Who Yearn for Art That Transforms: Parallels in the Black Arts and Feminist Art Movements in the United States", Lisa Gail Collins outlines the similarities of both the Black Arts and feminist art movements, arguing that both movements resemble each other; they share "similar traits, tendencies, tactics, and goals" (Collins 2006:718). "The black arts and feminist art movements were cultural corollaries, or wings, of the larger black power and women's liberation movements" (729). While the two movements had different key figures – the Black Arts Movement was motivated by Malcom X, while the women's liberation movement was influenced by Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* from 1949 (724) – both of the movements worked against the subordination by the white male dominant culture.

While Amiri Baka is credited to have started the Black Arts Movement with the founding of the Black Arts Repertory Theater/School (BARTS) in Harlem, "an alternative community center, school, and performance space based on the evolving principles of black power and black consciousness […]" (723), feminist artist Judy Chicago and her founding of the "Feminist Art Program" at Fresno State College are credited with the initiation of the feminist art movement (726): "Directly responding to Beauvoir's claims that women in the past had not been able to excel in the arts and humanities and that their thoughts and creations had been stifled and lost, Chicago made historical research central to the Feminist Art Program's curriculum" (726). Both movements, Collins states, were dedicated to "studying the past, confronting the present, and envisioning a new future […]" (727). Through these artistic interventions, women and Black artists challenge the authority of the white male genius and instead replace him with an artist who creates work that empowers "his or her new and nonelite audience through validation and consciousness-raising" (732).

One question in regard to feminism and photography, then, according to Claire Raymond, remains: "Fixed as any given photograph is in capitalist networks of viewership, can it advocate against the powerful dominating the powerless?" (Raymond 2017:2). Over the course of history and visual history, the white male viewpoint has determined the discourse. Many female artists have since created counter-viewpoints in order to fight the patriarchal world order. Claire Raymond explores in *Women Photographers and Feminist Aesthetics* (2017) the way photographs can advocate against sexism. She argues that photographs can contribute to "end

patriarchal domination" by exhibiting a *feminist aesthetic* (3); she uses the theory of Jacques Rancière, who suggests that the "*aestheton* – the aesthetic force that an image may produce – is a political force [...]" (Rancière in Raymond 2017:2-3). According to Raymond, "by aesthetic force, photographs may push the viewer to resee – to rearrange – what he or she has once seen to be real, natural, or given: to re-see cultural structures of power and domination" (Raymond 2017:19). What are these aesthetic forces? She argues that "the newness – the reordering of the sensible – is the defining force of the aesthetic" (7). Ultimately, this feminist aesthetic "subverts social patterns of domination"(8). Similar to the definition of Neal's "Black aesthetic", the feminist aesthetic is motivated by political activism.

One of the most iconic feminist photographers is Cindy Sherman, most famously with her photographs in the aesthetic of film stills, her *Untitled Series* (1977-80). Sherman is part of a generation of New York female artists, who works "at the intersection of high and low art, of art and mass media/mass culture, and of image and language, and whose works address certain ideological discourses of the Postmodern mode" (Kamimura 1987: 40). Sherman's work not only shows a feminist subject matter, but addresses a female viewer, moving away from the male gaze. Her photographic work foregrounds the voyeurism and fetishism of women often found in film, such as film noir of the 1950s and 60s. In addition to appearing as stereotypical images of women, she creates images that heighten women's stereotypical appearances by mocking it.

3.3. Black Feminist Thought

This chapter will examine "Black feminist thought", a term coined by Patricia Hill Collins in her 1990 book "Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment". As Collins states, "African-American women's social location as a collectivity has fostered distinctive albeit heterogeneous Black feminist intellectual traditions that, for convenience in this volume, I call Black feminist thought" (Collins 2000:34). This chapter will give a brief overview of Black feminist thinkers – intellectuals, artists, authors and musicians – who focus their work on empowering Black women.

In the 1960s, the U.S. women's movement began, yet, it was a very white movement: "When the movement toward feminism began in the late 60s, black women rarely participated as a group" (hooks 2015:185). In *Ain't I a Woman*, hooks disseminates the role of Black women within the feminist, Civil Rights and Black Power Movement. Black women faced discrimination in both the feminist and anti-racist movements: "Since 1970,U.S.Black women have become increasingly vocal in criticizing sexism in Black civil society (Wallace 1978; E.F. White 1984; Cleage 1993; Crenshaw 1993)" (Collins 2000:186). In her 1989 landmark essay on intersectionality, Kimberlé Crenshaw outlines the problem of intersectional discrimination, discussing how Black women are marginalized in both feminist theory and antiracist politics (Crenshaw 1989:140). Women of color within the feminist movements have been excluded and spoken for (Crenshaw 1989:154). The very early beginnings of the suffrage movement were racist and classist, not recognizing the concerns of Black working women. Consequently, Black female suffragists "became disillusioned with women's rights" (hooks 2015:188). Abolitionist Sojourner Truth combatted the erasure of Black womanhood from the suffrage movement and deconstructed "femininity" altogether with her speech at the Women's Rights Conference in Akron, Ohio in 1851:

> Look at me! Look at my arm!... I have plowed, and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me–and ain't I a woman? I could work as much as any man (when I could get it), and bear de lash as well–and ain't I a woman? I have borne five children and I seen 'em mos all sold off into slavery, and when I cried out with a mother's grief, none but Jesus hear–and ain't I a woman? (Truth in hooks 2015:160).

While the narrow definition of white womanhood only focused on white women's experiences in domestic spheres, "Black women have traditionally worked outside the home in numbers far exceeding the labor participation rate of white women" (Crenshaw 1989:156). Their set of experiences and the set of controlling images they have been subjugated to were vastly different from that of white women: "As American white men idealized white womanhood, they sexually assaulted and brutalized black women" (hooks 2015:32). As hooks argues, unlike white women, Black women have been denied their womanhood, because "racist, sexist socialization had conditioned us to devalue our femaleness and to regard race as the only relevant label of identification" (hooks 2015:1). Due to this, Black women have also not identified with the women's movement; since they were not considered "women" by white women or men.

In addition to the exclusion from the women's movements across time, Black women have struggled to be accepted as equals in anti-racist movements. While anti-racist efforts aim to defy white supremacy, sexist oppression has often been overlooked: "Black community organizations can oppose racial oppression yet perpetuate gender oppression, can challenge class exploitation yet foster heterosexism" (Collins 2000:86). During the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s, Black female activists did not receive public acclaim like Black male leaders did (hooks 2015:4) and were expected to take over subservient roles, catering to Black men who perpetuated patriarchal role patterns (hooks 2015:4). Toni Cade Bambara, for example, was very outspoken on the oppressive role of Black women in the Black organizations in the 1960s: "It would seem that every organization you can name has had to struggle at one time or another with seemingly mutinous cadres of women getting salty about having to man the telephones or fix the coffee while the men wrote the position papers and decided on policy" (Cade Bambara in hooks 2015:5). Another pivotal moment that uncovered the sexism in the Black community was marked by the hearings of Clarence Thomas and Anita Hill: "During the hearings, Anita Hill, a lawyer and former employee of Thomas during his years of heading up the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, accused Thomas of sexually harassing her" (Collins 2000:126). As Collins points out, some argued that Hill "should have kept her mouth shut" (126) even if Thomas had sexually harassed her – because of racial solidarity. As Black feminist thinkers such as Angela Davis and Kimberlé Crenshaw argue, sexual harassment and rape is "embedded in intersecting oppressions of race, gender, and class (Davis 1978, 1981, 1989; Crenshaw 1991)" (127). Ultimately, as hooks asserts, Black women "were placed in a double bind" – starting in the suffrage movement as well as in more contemporary struggles for liberation (hooks 2015:3). By supporting women's movements, they allied themselves with the racism of white women, and by allying with Black men, they allied themselves with patriarchal oppression.

Through Black feminist thought, Black women have been able to voice their oppression. Prominent Black feminist thinkers are Audre Lorde, bell hooks, Patricia Hill Collins, Kimberlé Crenshaw, Angela Davis, Michele Wallace and others, have fought back by making visible the concerns of Black women: "Not only does the form assumed by this thought diverge from standard academic theory—it can take the form of poetry, music, essays, and the like – but the purpose of Black women's collective thought is distinctly different" (Collins 2000:9). These

women have been influenced by feminism, anti-racism, Marxism, and queer theory. Through their efforts, they have reclaimed Black womanhood, utilizing techniques of "discovering, reinterpreting, and analyzing the ideas of subgroups within the larger collectivity of U.S. Black women who have been silenced" (13). Angela Davis, for example, discusses in her book *Blues legacies and Black feminism: Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith and Billie Holiday* how the blues is an early feminist practice: "Twenty-five years after the second-wave debates on what counts as feminism, popular assumptions that the historical origins of feminism are white stubbornly persist in many black communities, despite significant feminist (and womanist) activism and research" (Davis 1999:26).

Numerous Black feminist thinkers have criticized the white feminist movement's tendencies to overlook and exclude women of color. Directly responding to Mulvey's essay on the "male gaze", hooks created the concept of the "oppositional gaze" which was developed by Black female spectators. While Mulvey does not consider a female, let alone Black female spectator, hooks argues that Black critical women were aware of the "violent erasure of black womanhood" (hooks 1992:119) in cinema and consequently developed an "oppositional gaze": "Black female spectators, who refused to identify with white womanhood, who would not take on the phallocentric gaze of desire and possession, created a critical space" (hooks 1992:122).

Other Black feminists like Audre Lorde called attention to white feminists' shortcomings in academia, as for example in her 1979 landmark speech at the *Second Sex Conference* in Manhattan: "Why weren't other black women and third world women found to participate in this conference?" (Lorde in Bambara and Moraga 1983:100). Lorde points out the work that white feminist women have to undertake in order to truly challenge the patriarchy, because "for the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house" (99). Lorde stresses the importance of community among white women and women of color, which is a source of strength and ultimately will lead to freedom:

> As women, we have been taught to either ignore our differences, or to view them as causes for separation and suspicion rather than as forces for change. Without community there is no liberation, only the most vulnerable and temporary armistice between an individual and her oppression. But community must not mean a shedding of our differences, nor the pathetic pretense that these differences do not exist (99).

As a Black lesbian, she drew attention to the heterosexism in the feminist movement: "The absence of any consideration of lesbian consciousness or the consciousness of third world women leaves a serious gap within this conference and within papers presented here" (98). Black lesbians like Lorde not only highlighted racism and sexism as forms of oppression but heterosexism as well: "Black lesbians have identified heterosexism as a form of oppression and the issues they face living in homophobic communities as shaping their interpretations of everyday events" (Collins 2000:28).

With regard to the masculinist bias in antiracist movements, Black feminist Michele Wallace's book *Black Macho and The Myth of the Superwoman* (1978) caused a controversy, illustrating the "difficulty of challenging the masculinist bias in Black and social political thought" (Collins 2000:8). As Wallace recalls, "I discovered my voice, and when brothers talked to me, I talked back. This had its hazards. My social life was a guerilla warfare. Black men, at least the ones I knew, seemed totally confounded when it came to treating black women like people" (Wallace 2016:61). Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982) was received in similar, hostile ways. Her portrayal of male characters has been criticized as unfair (Donnelly 2010; Collins 2000), since the men in *The Color Purple* have "significant problems relating to women as anything other than their personal possessions, to be used as they see fit" (Donnelly 2010:88) and "sexual intercourse in the novel tends to be presented as rape or abuse […]" (90). However, as Donnelly points out, it is often overlooked that the men in the novel "eventually learn to give up their desires to control the women in their lives and accept their strength and equality" (91). Over a decade before Walker wrote *The Color Purple*, Toni Morrison's debut novel *The Bluest Eye* (1970) explored Black womanhood and the destructiveness of prevailing standards of beauty. The importance of the writings by Black women cannot be understated: "Historically, literature by U.S. Black women writers provides one comprehensive view of Black women's struggles to form positive self-definitions in the face of derogated images of Black womanhood" (Collins 2000:93).

Music, criticism and literature are one site of Black feminist thought. Another one is visual art production. As the protagonist in Faith Ringgold's art work *The French Collection* writes: "Ideas are my freedom. And freedom is why I became an artist" (Ringgold in Cameron 1998:142). However, as Ringgold recalls in an interview with her daughter Michele Wallace in *Invisibility Blues*, neither herself nor her art were not welcomed in cultural institutions (Wallace

2016:91). Important accounts on the exclusion of women and Black women from art institutions have been written by Griselda Pollock, Linda Nochlin and Michele Wallace, that further interrogate the issue. As Pollock asserted, "as an active element of contemporary hegemonies, the canon polices the entry to the pantheon of art by contemporary artists" (Pollock 1999:171). It was in the 1970s that Black women artists became increasingly vocal and challenged the art world and its exclusionary practices. Howardena Pindell, Betye Saar, Faith Ringgold, Lorna Simpson, and Carrie Mae Weems used techniques such as performance art, photography, quilting, collage and assemblage to subvert representations of Black womanhood and highlight the oppressions Black women had been facing. "Black women performers have long utilized the tools of performance to assert claims to social space; these artistic strategies were 'forms of mobility' that 'were key in claiming subjecthood'" (Brown in McMillan 2015:12). While the narrative around performance art has focused on white women, Black women (like Howardena Pindell) likewise used performance art to subvert cultural norms by using their bodies. In her photographs, Weems also uses her body in order to subvert these cultural norms, working in the tradition of Black feminist thought and art.

4. *Not Manet's Type*

Carrie Mae Weems is of a generation of Black feminist artists who have consistently challenged the gaze and objectification of Black female bodies in culture. In *Not Manet's Type* (1997), she tackles a) oppressive beauty ideologies, specifically in Modern Art, b) criticizing the Western art historical canon for excluding Black women artists and c) creating images that center around Black women. The series is comprised of a succession of five photographs. In each photograph, we see the character Weems is portraying reflected in a mirror from the same angle, which is positioned on a vanity table. The angle of the photograph suggests that we are standing in the room, slightly to the left of the vanity. In the first two images, we see her standing with her back to us, leaning on the bedframe. In the first, third, and fourth photograph, she is wearing a black night dress, in the second and last one she is naked. The accompanying texts are printed in red capitalized letters on the bottom of the photo mount which frames all the photographs. The texts are written in first-person, illuminating the woman's inner thoughts:

> Standing on shaky ground/ posed myself for critical study/ but was no longer certain/ of the questions to ask/ It was clear I was not Manet's Type, Picasso who has a way with women-/ only used me & Duchamp never/ even considered me/ But it could have been worse/ imagine my fate had de Kooning gotten hold of me/ I knew, not from memory,/ but from hope, that there were other/ models by which to live/ I took a tip from Frida/ who from her bed painted incessantly- beautifully/ while Diego scaled the scaffolds/ to the top of the world (Figure 1-5).

Created in 1997, this series focuses on twentieth-century beauty ideologies in art and culture by referencing famous artists from that period. It "alludes to the hegemonic attitudes of European society towards women of color while simultaneously bringing women of color into the foreground of discussion of Modern art" (Winiarski 2018:260).

4.1. Black Models, Beauty Ideologies and Modern Art

First, I will establish what how notions of beauty were established in Western culture and the analyze how Weems is deconstructing these notions while creating counter-hegemonic images of beauty. *Not Manet's Type* illustrates these oppressive beauty ideals and the gaze of white supremacist sexist society on a visual and textual level. In her title *Not Manet's Type*, Weems already suggests how Black women were not seen as beautiful, according to modernist artists such as Manet. In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon writes about the internalization of beauty ideologies: "I sit down at the fire and I become aware of my uniform. I had not seen it. It is indeed ugly. I stop there, for who can tell me what beauty is?" (Fanon 2008:86). Blackness was seen as antithesis to white beauty (Willis 2010:16) because, as Hall points out, in order to establish whiteness, there was the need for an opposite: "We know what *black* means, Saussure argued, not because there is some essence of 'blackness' but because we can contrast it with its opposite – *white*" (Hall 1997:234). As Collins argues, "within the binary thinking that underpins intersecting oppressions, blue-eyed, blond, thin White women could not be considered beautiful without the Other – Black women with African features of dark skin, broad noses, full lips, and kinky hair" (Collins 2000:106). Black women have never been able to "live up to prevailing standards of beauty – standards used by White men, White women, Black men, and, most painfully, one another" (Collins 2000:89).

Within this ideology of beauty, the by-product of colorism plays another crucial role: "This division of African-Americans into two categories – the 'Brights' and the 'Lesser Blacks' – affects dark-skinned and light-skinned women differently" (91). Toni Morrison's 1970 debut

novel *The Bluest Eye* offeres a powerful account of the impact of beauty ideologies, including colorism, on Black girls and women. Character Pecola Breedlove prays for "the bluest eyes" ("each night, without fail, she prayed for blue eyes" (Morrison 1970:46)), while Claudia destroys the white dolls her family gives her, realizing how the disavowal of Blackness is a construction by the white dominant society and is internalized by many Black women: "Adults, older girls, shops, magazines, newspapers, window signs – all the world had agreed that a blue-eyed, yellow-haired, pink-skinned doll was what every girl child treasured" (20). She wonders, "what made people look at them and say, "Awwwww', but not for me?" (22).

Weems tackles Western beauty ideologies through her use of the mirror; in each photograph, we see the protagonist's body reflected in it (Figure 1-5). The mirror has two functions: it evokes the notion of *looking in*, putting the viewer into the position of a voyeur and also, the mirror symbolizes the beauty ideals Black women have to comply. Weems constructs the voyeurism by making the viewer a participant in an intimate scene; the woman in the photographs does not acknowledge the viewer, which could either be interpreted as ignorance or her unknowingness. The round mirror resembles the lens of the camera, offering a telescopic view into the room, which is only reinforced through the contrast between the darkness of the room and the lightness of the scene in the mirror. This cinematic view reinforces the notion a peephole and places us in the position of spectators. In "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema", Mulvey asserts that this looking in as one of the pleasures of cinema, using Freud's theory on scopophilia, which he associated with "taking other people as objects, subjecting them to a controlling and curious gaze" (Mulvey 2016:11). The woman is thus seeing herself "through the eyes of others", through our gaze. However, Weems subverts the subjugation through the gaze that takes place in visual culture. First of all, the woman in the photographs does not look at us, her body is fragmented and hidden throughout the series: In the first image, she wears a night dress, in the second image, she is naked yet the shadow covers parts of her body; in the third image, she is sitting on the floor and the mirror cuts her off; in the fourth image she is sitting on the bed in a night dress again and in the last image, she is lying naked on the bed, hiding her breasts behind her arm.

In every image, she manages to resist the gaze which has historically objectified Black naked bodies, starting with the slave market, on which naked men and women were displayed naked "exposed to the calculating gazes of their would-be owners, who checked their teeth, felt

their muscles and fondled their genitals to make sure of a good buy" (Pollock 1999:299). Early photography further subjugated naked Black bodies to the colonizing eye, trying to "prove" some scientific theories about Black people's inferiority. Photography was used to show these assumed differences and as an *objective* medium proved successful in this endeavor. As Gilman argues, in the nineteenth century, the image of the Hottentot female was merged with the image of the prostitute (Gilman 1985:206). Black women like Sarah Baartman were displayed and later photographed in order to "prove" their differences by exposing their genitalia, and consequently, her sexual parts served as the "central image for the black female throughout the nineteenth century" (Gilman 1985:216). Ultimately, this resulted in Black women becoming "pornographic 'outlets' for white men in Europe and America" for centuries (Walker 1981:42). The protagonist in *Not Manet's Type*, however, even though naked or wearing a see-through night dress, does not reveal her body fully to the viewer – just enough to remind us of the racist, sexist history of the Black female nude in photography and art.

In addition to the deconstruction of the white, male gaze in early photography, the mirror, vanity table, and her nude body, reference images of white women in Western painting and notions of ideal beauty. In European painting, white women were often portrayed at their *toilette*, paired with a woman of color who served her:

> In European painting the combination of an African woman as slave or servant and an Oriental harem or domestic interior with reclining women, clothed or nude, represents a historical conjunction of two, distinct aspects of Europe's relations with the world it dominated through colonization and exploited through slavery (Pollock 1999:294).

The focus of these paintings is on the white women, while Black women serve as "accessories to that display of/for European sexuality" (289). Moreover, in these paintings, white women looking in mirrors are a topos that represent *vanitas* (Nochlin 2018:27) and they serve as a "warning against the sins of pride and vanity" and intend to animate the viewers to "choose to live with less superficial concerns" (Wood 2007:28). By choosing to portray the protagonist of *Not Manet's Type* with a mirror, vanity, and dried up flowers in a vase (Figure 1 and 4), Weems hints at these painterly conventions and the notions of beauty and *vanitas*. However, the woman in the photo series *Not Manet's Type* is Black and by herself, thus creating images that take the Black "Other" out of the role of the servant and into the role of the main protagonist. She is

inserting herself into a fictional history of art that includes Black female nudes representing beauty:

> Whereas the sensuous white female nude, painstakingly objectified for the pleasure of the white male spectator, is not only a commonplace, but indeed, a cliché of white Western imagery in fine art, the black female nude is disproportionately rare especially in the conceptualizations of black artists (Wallace 2004:190).

Responding to Nochlin's "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists", Wallace points out in her essay "Why Are There No Great Black Artists?" how Nochlin's article excludes Black female nudes from the equation. According to her, the lack of Back female nudes portrayed as beautiful lies in the artists' "lack of faith in black humanity […]" (190) and Black artists neither depicted Black female nudes because "perhaps in response to the stereotypical emphasis on an allegedly animalistic hypersexuality" (190). By depicting a Black female nude, Weems points to that problematic history of both hypersexualizing Black naked bodies as well as the lack of representation of Black women as beautiful nudes in Western art. In the text, it becomes more clear that the scene is fictional, and that Black women were never considered "beautiful" but instead, were erased or fetishized.

The text is in the first person, telling us about the experiences of the Black woman depicted. The title, as well as the texts, ask the viewer to think about the treatment of Black models and Black female beauty within art history, especially in the history of Modern Art, for example in the works of Manet and Picasso: "In Modernist painting, Black women were denied beauty and agency. When not depicted as Hottentot Venus, Black women would usually be portrayed as domestic servant […]" (Winiarski 2018:267). In addition, modernism is deeply entrenched with a fetishization of non-Western cultures: "The colonial origins of modernism must be examined within the context of negrophilia, the social and cultural phenomenon of white fear/desire for the black body" (Nelson in Willis 2010:118). Modernist practice both fantasized and denounced the Black female body, it was racist surveillance, representation, and "consumption of African bodies as 'primitive' objects themselves" (119) Manet's painting *Olympia* (1862-63) (Figure 6) and Picasso's version of 1901 titled *A Parody of Manets Olympia with Junyer and Picasso* (1902) (Figure 7) are emblematic of this split of fascination and condemnation of the Black female body: Olympia represents the white prostitute, reclining on a sofa, while the Black woman servant stands behind her. "Through the proximity of the two

bodies", Nelson argues, "'black sexuality' was transferred onto the body of a white female subject or the black female subject acted as a reflective surface to reinforce the unquestioned beauty and racial superiority of the white female subject" (Nelson in Willis 2010:120).

The Black female servant heightens the white woman's beauty. She is connected to "deviant sexuality" through the proximity to the white prostitute. In Picasso's *Olympia*, the Black woman then comes to fully embody both Blackness and sexuality in one, as she is depicted as the prostitute: "For Picasso, the bodies of the black woman and the white prostitute became conflated into a single iconic Hottentot anatomy in his drawing Olympia (1901) […]" (120). She is lying naked on a bed, her body parts fully visible, next to two white men, signifying sexual promiscuity, and an uncontrollable sexual appetite: "She heightens the sexuality of the scene by her presence while also signifying warnings about the disease to be found in primitive sexuality" (Harris in Willis 2010:164).

With the title and sentence "It is clear that I was not Manet's Type", Weems refers to paintings by Manet such as *Olympia*, in which the Black model stands in the background, merely heightening the white woman's beauty and sexuality. She is everything the white woman is not: Black, plump, and clothed. In addition to her Blackness, her body shape was "Not Manet's Type" either: "Fatness is one stigma of the prostitute […]" (Gilman in Willis 2010:25). Manet thus is linking the Black servant to prostitution by placing her next to a prostitute and through her body shape. Ultimately, she serves as an opposite and as a servant to the white woman. Another modernist artist Weems names is Picasso. The following sentence, "Picasso – who had his way with women – only used me" points to the way Picasso treated the Black female subject in his art: Using her as sex object and appropriating African cultures in his art[6]. The Black woman is no longer invisible in the paintings of Picasso, but instead hypervisible, which shows modernism's fascination with the Black body. Weems shows the two ways modernist art has used Black women: as invisible backdrops and servants, as well as hypervisible sex objects. On the textual level, she calls out white male artists' complicity in the creation of beauty standards and oppression of Black women.

Without the text, the photographs could be read as self-portraits: "Black self-portraiture […] has broken many of its links with the dominant 'western' humanist celebration of the self

[6] The colonial origins of Modernism must be examined within the context of negrophilia, the social and cultural phenomenon of white fear/desire for the black body (Nelson in Willis 2010:118).

and has become more the staking of a claim, a wager. Here, the black self-image is, in a double-sense, an exposure, a coming out. The self is caught emerging" (Hall in Sealy 2016:201). But the self is not "caught emerging" in the sense of Hall's analysis. Although it is *her* body, through the combination of photographs and texts, Weems's protagonist becomes a *stand-in* for all Black female models and women throughout the history of art. Similar to artists such as Cindy Sherman or Howardena Pindell, Weems is using the feminist technique of "performing objecthood" in order to subvert cultural norms. Her performance or avatar, exceeds history and transforms into "transhistorical figurations" (McMillan 2015:12), representing Black womanhood and the objectification and fetishization of Black womanhood across history. In *Embodied Avatars: Genealogies of Black Feminist Art and Performance*, Uri McMillan examines Black feminist performance art. Performance art, as McMillan states, is art that incorporates the "body as an object" to subvert cultural norms and explore social issues; a time-based medium, performance art's most potent, electrifying, and lasting challenge is its radical evaporation of the distinction between art object and artist, blurring the lines "between action, performance, and a work of art" (McMillan 2015:3). McMillan's argument is that Black feminist performance artists are "performing objecthood" (7): "Becoming objects, in what follows, proves to be a powerful tool for performing one's body, a 'stylized repetition of acts' that rescripts how black female bodies move and are perceived by others" (7). McMillan argues that there is a special significance when Black feminist performance artists use their bodies as artistic mediums since enslaved women did legally not own their bodies. (8). Ultimately, performing objecthood is "a performance-based method that disrupts presumptive knowledges of black subjectivity" (9). His book focuses on Black women's performance art, as they have historically been marginalized within feminist art (24). The narrative centers mostly around white feminist artists, even though many Black feminist artists were doing performance art as well. One of the examples he uses is Howardena Pindell's 1980 criticism of white feminism in her 1980 video art piece *Free, White, and 21*. In the twelve-minute video, Pindell plays all the characters – herself as well as the white feminists who discriminated against her:

> The experiences Pindell describes in the video include her being granted and then denied placement in an advanced history class in high school, receiving five hundred job rejection letters after her graduation from the Yale University School of Art, and sexual harassment at a friend's wedding reception in Maine (153).

In the video, she portrays two versions of herself: Herself, the artist (Figure 8), as well as a white woman who is wearing a wig and sunglasses. This woman stands for all the white feminists Pindell has encountered who have continuously denied her experiences (153). In addition, she appears as "eerily silent and abstract avatars […]: one wraps herself mummy-like in strips of cloth, while another peels a sticky translucent mask off her face" (McMillan 2015:153).

In *Not Manet's Type*, Weems is also using her own body to disrupt these presumptive knowledges of Black subjectivity. She performs the objecthood of specifically Black female models in modernist art, calling out the erasure, fetishization and objectification in Western society. By performing these "stylized repetitions of acts", she functions as a "transhistorical avatar", embodying the experiences of Black women across history. The first-person narrator functions as *history's ghost*, retelling the stories of all the women who have suffered. In the photographs, too, she uses her body as this *ghost*, as a *stand-in* for all the Black women models of modernist art that have been made invisible or been fetishized.

4.2. Why Are There No Great Black Women Artists?

In this chapter, I will examine Black women as subjects and artists and discuss how Weems challenges the exclusionary canon of art history. "I knew, not from memory,/ but from hope, that there were other/ models by which to live/ I took a tip from Frida/ who from her bed painted incessantly- beautifully/ while Diego scaled the scaffolds/ to the top of the world" (Figure 4 and 5). The last artist Weems names is Latinx artist Frida Kahlo, a woman who is known for her self-portraits and incredible strength and has been hailed as a feminist icon. By naming Kahlo, Weems is challenging the white male canon of art history – a canon comprised of Manets, Picassos, and Rivieras. Not only is Weems tackling beauty ideologies and the treatment of Black female models within modernist art, she is also investigating the limitations for Black women artists and their exclusion from art-making as well as the canon. By naming Frida Kahlo, she is pointing out how women have always defied the confines of womanhood, how they have created their own images, and how looking to other women for inspiration is uplifting. The accompanying photograph embodies this optimism and "way out" for Black women from the darkness of objectification through art: In this photograph, there is light coming through the window, illuminating the whole scene, literally symbolizing the pictured woman's enlightenment that there are "other models to live by" or symbolizing how other women artists

guide her towards *the light*. The woman is lying on the bed with her eyes closed. In the left hand she is holding a cigarette and the right arm is hanging over the bed. She seems at ease, no longer standing around the room or sitting on the floor and bed, pondering about her position as a Black woman in society.

In the beginning (Figure 2 and 3), she is speaking from the position of a Black female model in art, embodying all the Black models in art history, while in the subsequent text about Frida Kahlo, she speaks from the position of an artist. "Other models", meaning *other role models* in art like Frida Kahlo, who finally help her find strength. She is lying on the bed like Frida Kahlo, who was painting from her bed after a bus accident had injured her whole body. By choosing Frida Kahlo, Weems highlights the hardship women artists overcame (especially non-white women artists) and how through art, they could create their own image. She also highlights the importance of solidarity between women, and role models. As Audre Lorde stresses in her speech *The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House* (1979), that only through connecting with other women, acknowledging the differences and building community, is it possible to sustainably defy patriarchy:

> Interdependency between women is the only way to the freedom which allows the "I" to "be", not in order to be used, but in order to be creative. As women, we have been taught to either ignore our differences or to view them as causes for separation and suspicion rather than as forces for change. Without community, there is no liberation, only the most vulnerable and temporary armistice between an individual and her oppression (Lorde in Moaraga and Bambara 1983:99).

While Weems uses "other models by which to live", she no longer means *model* in the sense of white male artists' objects, but in the sense of *role models*. The Black woman in the photographs leaves the position of the model and becomes the creator of her own image – an artist, just like Kahlo. Unlike their male counterparts, women artists have historically been denied access to institutions such as universities and museums. In her 1971 essay "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?", Nochlin points out how the white male viewpoint of art history has been accepted as the universal viewpoint while creating the "magical aura surrounding the representation arts and their creators […]" (Nochlin 2018:153).

In *Dark Designs*, Michele Wallace takes Nochlin's essay as a starting point to further ask: "Why Are There No Great Black Artists?". Like the U.S. feminist movement generally, Nochlin's essay "proved to be a very white middle-class affair […] (Wallace 2004:189).

Wallace acknowledges that Nochlin adds "and black artists, too" to her formulation, but points out that this comparison does not suffice (189). The questions Nochlin raises are thus only applicable to some extent for Black women artists. Black women artists are not summarized in the appendix "and blacks, too" because they face intersectional discrimination. Not only were and still are they degraded due to their gender, but also to their race. Black artistic production was not deemed art, because, "according to Paul Gilroy, long before 'scientific racism gained its intellectual grip', Hegel 'denied blacks the ability to appreciate the necessary mystery involved in the creation of truly symbolic art'" (Gilroy in Wallace 2004:190).

Consequently, art by both Black artists and women artists was considered "low art", which positioned Black women artists in the category low art twice. There is a canonical division "between intellectual and manual art forms, between truly creative and merely decorative practices" (Pollock 1999:25). This split between "intellectual art" and "manual craft" contributed to the exclusion of manual art, which was often employed by artists of color and women artists: "It has become more culturally advanced to make art with pigment and canvas, stone or bronze than with linen and thread, wool or clay and pigment" (25). Women's art, Pollock argues, such as quilting, weaving and embroidery exposes "the troubled nature of the Western canon's attempt to valorize its fine art culture above all others by a hierarchy of means, media and materials" (25).

A very prominent Black woman artist working predominantly with quilts is Faith Ringgold (*1930). In the following, I will compare her work *The French Collection* from 1991 to *Not Manet's Type* in regard to the portrayal of a Black woman artist. *The French Collection*, like *Not Manet's Type*, tackles the issue of Black women as objects in the modern art of Picasso and Manet. In addition, both series depict a protagonist who ultimately reclaims her agency with the help of other women artists and through creating art. In her work *The French Collection,* which is comprised of twelve story quilts, Ringgold tackles questions of artistic production as a Black woman and the exclusion of Black women artists from the Western canon: "Using her redeveloped medium of painted and sewn quilts, Faith Ringgold places black women in the very spaces and images that constitute both a white and a male canon" (Pollock 1999:188). Like in *Not Manet's Type*, the setting of *The French Collectio*n is Modernist Paris and she tells a fictional story. This story functions as "a mediation on the individual's relation to history, granting as much importance to what may have happened as to what surely did or did not"

(Cameron 1998:9). The story quilt evolves around the fictional protagonist Willia Marie Simone, who was born in Atlanta and moves to Paris in the 1920s. The accompanying texts with her life story are in an epistolary form; they are letters addressed to her aunt Melissa in the United States (20). In Paris, she meets all the artistic and literary figures of the time, including French artists and American expats such as Pablo Picasso, Gertrude Stein and Josephine Baker[7]. She also meets famous African-American artists and activists such as Sojourner B. Truth, Zora Neale Hurston and Frederick Douglass. Starting out as a model for artists such as Picasso and Matisse, she ultimately becomes an artist herself and retires, opening the "Café des Artistes". This process "underlines her growing transformation from a passive object of beauty into a responsive subject with the need to direct the narrative from her own point of view" (10).

In an essay about the work of her mother, Michele Wallace states that *The French Collection* is a "celebration of the fact that Faith Ringgold managed to create her own path with virtually no specific role models" (Wallace in Cameron 1998:14). The role models she uses are an assemblage of white male and female artists and Black abolitionists and writers (14-15). Although she includes fellow Black women artists such as Emma Amos in one of her quilts, mostly, she had to carve out her own path (14-15). In 1961, Ringgold made a trip to France with her mother and her two young daughters: "Faith's mission was to see as much of the art of Europe as possible in order to determine whether she could finally be an artist" (18). She tried to figure out how to be an artist as a Black woman and a mother of two, "despite the landmines placed in her path by institutional patriarchy, white supremacy, American provincialism, anti-intellectualism, and xenophobia" (15).

The French Collection begins with a quilt that depicts the protagonist Willia Marie and her kids and a friend dancing in the Louvre in front of the Mona Lisa (Figure 9): "Willia Marie is dancing with a friend named Marcia and her three children at the Louvre. The story is in the form of a letter to aunt Melissa, who is keeping her children in the United States" (Wallace in Cameron 1998:20). As Moira Roth points out, "the lure of Paris, as well as French modernist

[7] "In *The French Collection* Ringgold, like an extravagant novelist of a picaresque tale, a cunning sleight-of-hand juggler, and a director-playwright, combines French sites of art and modern European art and artists with the history of American black and white expatriates and invented visits to Europe by black female celebrities, ranging from Sojourner Truth to Zora Neale Hurston" (Roth in Cameron 1998:54).

art, coupled with the desire to give herself and other African Americans a place within that tradition, became a major impetus for The French Collection" (Roth in Cameron 1998:50). In another quilt, *The Picnic at Giverny* (Figure 10), Ringgold places the protagonist in the gardens of Monet. She is surrounded by American women, such as artist Emma Amos and art historian Thalia Gouma-Peterson (54). The protagonist painting the scene next to her: The women sit on a colorful blanket, two of them are standing. The women are both Black and White, artists, art historians and friends. They are smiling and looking to each other. Behind them is the pond with water-lilies that Monet famously painted. The motif of the water-lily pond, the colors and brushstroke of the background, are reminiscent of Monet's Impressionism. In the accompanying text, the protagonist clarifies[8] that she is, in fact, combining two paintings from modernism: Monet's *Nymphéas* (a series beginning in 1889) and Manet's *Le Déjeuner Sur L'Herbe* (1863). In the accompanying text, Ringgold speaks through the fictional character Willia Marie:

> I kept seeing Manet's *Le Déjeuner Sur L'Herbe*, the painting that cause such a scandal in Paris. It was not allowed in the salon because it showed Manet's brother-in-law and a male friend having a picnic with two nude women, all of whom were recognizable. I kept thinking: Why not replace the traditional nude woman at the picnic with Picasso in the nude, and the 10 American women fully clothed? (Ringgold in Cameron 1998:131)

The reference to Manet's painting is a *nude*: A naked Picasso sits on the left corner of the quilt. Ringgold is turning around the conventions, replacing the female nude of Manet's painting with the artist Picasso, who sits in the exact same pose as the nude woman in Manet's painting. This humorous reversal reveals a much deeper truth: The lack of male nudes in art history. By painting nude men, she does not intend to express power over men, like men expressed power over women, but she just wants to "see nude men in the company of fully clothed women for a change" (131). Ringgold is "re-arranging" common representations, using her art as a political tool, applying a feminist and a Black aesthetic. By placing Picasso at the very corner of the painting and making herself the creator of the image, the image functions as the outcome of a Black woman becoming subject. She started out as a nude model for Picasso and Manet (*Picasso's studio* and *Matisse's Model*), and now the roles are reversed and she has become the artist, painting a nude Picasso.

[8] The story is in the form of a letter to aunt Melissa, who is keeping her children in the United States (Wallace in Cameron 1998:20).

The other women pictured in the quilt have empowered her to become an artist, to realize herself, instead of staying a passive object:

> I am deeply inspired by these American women and their conversations about art and women in America. It makes me homesick for my country. And for their women's movement, I have created this painting Picnic at Giverny par le tribute. They have given me something new to ponder, a challenge to confront in my art, a new direction. And pride in being a Negro woman (Ringgold in Cameron 1998:131).

The French Collection and *Not Manet's Type* pose similar questions and come to the same conclusion: By having role models and other women to look to, a *community* in Audre Lorde's sense, the Black women artists in the works are able to becomes subjects and break out of their position as passive objects of the gazes of white male artists. Both Ringgold and Weems are critiquing the art historical canon, which has privileged the Manets, Picassos and Rivieras of the world and has rendered Black women invisible, yet at the same time hypervisible. The Modern age of Picasso and Manet, Owens argues, is the age of the "master narrative" and the "age of representation" (Owens in Foster 1983:66). Feminist critique and postmodernism challenge these claims to truth and universality: Postmodernism is, according to Owens, a "crisis in Western representation, its authority and universal claims-a crisis announced by heretofore marginal or repressed discourses, feminism most significant among them" (Foster 1983:xiii). Feminism especially "challenges the order of patriarchal society, epistemological in that it questions the structure of its representation" (xiii). *Not Manet's Type* and *The French Collection* can be understood as postmodern, feminist critiques of the "master narrative" of Western art history. The Western art historical canon, which has historically excluded women artists and artists of color, because the white, male artists of the world were visible and sustaining the "master narrative" around the "male genius" artist. Artists like Frida Kahlo have defied the social regulations of the canon by being celebrated artists. Griselda Pollock, in her criticism of the canon, formulates three feminist approaches. One of them is encountering the canon "as a discursive strategy in the production and reproduction of sexual difference and its complex configurations with gender and related modes of power" (Pollock 1999:26). This approach is more about deconstructing the canon altogether instead of aiming for inclusion, which is ultimately only a reinforcement of the status quo. Instead, "the canon becomes visible as an

enunciation of Western masculinity, itself saturated by its own traumatized sexual formation" (26).

Weems is critiquing the treatment of Black female models in the history of art and questioning the very formation of the art historical canon based on exclusion. In the first four images, she is critiquing the treatment of Black models within modernism and well as the narrow representation of white male artists within the canon. In the last image, she visually opens up the canon through the light source which illuminates the room and her mentioning of Kahlo. Like other Black feminist performance artists, Weems is not presenting herself as an individual, but "performing objecthood", acting as a *stand-in* for all Black women who have been mistreated by the canon, modernism, and the dominant culture. Both Weems and Ringgold created a fictional character who becomes subject and artist, referencing other female artists as their role models. By making a Black woman the protagonist of her series and making her inner thoughts visible, Weems creates images of Black female subjectivity and de-centers the white male artist geniuses of the art world.

5. *The Kitchen Table Series*

In this part, I will analyze Carrie Mae Weems's iconic *Kitchen Table Series* from 1990. In total, the series consists of 20 black-and-white photographs and fourteen text panels. The text was added to the series later, which makes texts and images autonomous from each other: "The corresponding story, a cross between a *bildungsroman* and a beat poem, came to her, unplanned, about a month after she'd finished shooting" (Moss 2016). Viewed together, text and image create an "interesting dynamic interplay" (Moss 2016). The series has been displayed in museums and galleries in a variety of ways: "Though the entirety of 'The Kitchen Table Series' is in the permanent collections of the Cleveland Museum of Art and the Detroit Institute of Arts, it is most often seen in parts, through individual scenes and rarely with its accompanying text […]" (Moss 2016).

In the 20 photographs, "Weems presents an intimate look at the psychological relationships and gender politics within the contemporary American family, as played out around the Kitchen Table" (Okobi 1998:55). The photographs are in a large format, each 27 1/4 inches x 27 1/4 inches. The viewer catches a glimpse into "the life of African-American woman

in a rich, multi-layered manner that integrates folkloric imagery and language with modern photographic conventions (55-56). In the following, I will give a brief overview of the images and some passages from the texts that accompany the photographs.

The setting in the kitchen is significant in many ways: All taken in her own kitchen[9], the kitchen symbolizes womanhood, domestic labor, and discussion. As Okobi pointed out: "The choice of the kitchen table is metaphoric, suggesting a woman's space, and symbolic of the tumultuous historical and contemporary signifiers that the kitchen has" (54). It is a highly gendered space and a site of "the battle around the family, the battle around monogamy, the battle around polygamy, the battle around...you know between the sexes, is gonna be played out really, in that space" (Weems in Miller and Ravich 2011: 1:38). In regard to Black women, the kitchen also has another meaning, as it is "the site of domestic labor by African-American women, going back to slavery times" (Okobi 1998:54). However, it also functions as a "spiritual place for open discussion" (Willis 200:183-84). The viewer is invited to not only look into this intimate setting, but, as the camera is positioned at the end of the kitchen table, to partake in the discussions centering around Black womanhood.

The 20 photographs are all taken from the exact same vantage point on the kitchen table. This evokes the notion of film stills. This notion is highlighted through the use of props, of carefully arranged objects on the table, varying in each photograph: "Within the series, recurrent props such as the Kitchen table, the various accouterments, a birdcage, a tapestry and a small picture in a white frame, along with characters and text assist in the depiction of the life of the central figure" (Okobi 1998:57). The main light source in the photographs is a lamp hanging from above, illuminating each scene in a *cinematic light*. Each character is performing their parts, and the camera is only acknowledged twice: In image one (Figure 11) and image seventeen (Figure 27), Weems is breaking with the fourth wall by looking directly at the camera/the viewer.

In the first six photographs, Weems is not alone in the picture – a man is sitting next to her. The text clarifies that he is her partner: "They met in the glistening twinkling crystal light of August/September sky. They were both educated, corn-fed-healthy-Mississippi-stock folk" (Text panel of Weems's *The Kitchen Table Series*, taken from The Detroit Institute of Arts

[9] I made them all in my own kitchen, all in my own house, using like a single light source, hanging over the kitchen table (Weems in Miller and Ravich 2011:1'02).

website[10]). In the seventh photograph, the man is gone and instead, a telephone is standing at the end of the table, while Weems is hunched over. The relationship seems not to be working out, as the text also implies: "In their daily life together trouble lurked. He said she was much too domineering. He didn't mind a woman speaking her mind, but hey, she was taking it a tad too far" (Detroit Institute of Arts). In image eight, nine and ten, Weems is pictured with two other women, who console her in her grief. In image eleven, her mother combs her hair and gives her advice: "Seeking clarity and purpose, she spoke about the problems with her momma who said, 'There's a difference between men and women. I can't tell ya what to do'" (Figure 43). In image twelve to sixteen, she is pictured with a young girl, her daughter. The text gives further insights into the woman's feelings about motherhood: "Oh yeah she loved the kid, she was responsible, but took no deep pleasure in motherhood […]" (Figure 45). The last four images show Weems alone at the kitchen table. In the very last image, she is shown playing solitaire, a game which can be played alone (Okobi 1998:60). The image is accompanied by the following text: "In and of itself, being alone again naturally wasn't a problem" (50).

In the following analysis, I will examine the photographs in regard to three different aspects: Photography, cinema, and the blues. I will read them against the grain of depictions in mainstream culture, as well as compare Weems's approach to the approaches taken by other Black women critics, filmmakers, artists and singers, to see a commonality in the creation of counter-hegemonic images of Black womanhood.

5.1. The Representation of Black Womanhood in Photography

One of the aspects *The Kitchen Table Series* critically assesses, is the production and perpetuation of harmful images of Black women in the history of photography. In this chapter, I will investigate *The Kitchen Table Series* in regard to photography as oppressive medium as well as its uses in regard to decolonization. Patricia Hill Collins asserts, "one key feature about the treatment of Black women in the nineteenth century was how their bodies were objects of display" (Collins 2000:136). In photography, the display of Black bodes was further solidified, depicting Black women as scientific objects as well as status symbols of the white masters in the so-called *mammy-and-child* portraits. Ultimately, none of the women were able to craft their

[10] https://www.dia.org/art/collection/object/kitchen-table-series-107105

own image, as they were forced into depictions crafted by the white male gaze. Yet, abolitionists such as Frederick Douglass and Sojourner B. Truth were also able to retrieve their image and create authentic representations of themselves to help humanize Black people's status in the United States.

As discussed in chapter two, even before the invention of photography, the Black female body was already displayed and objectified by European audiences at exhibitions and at slave auctions. As an example of Black women's bodies displayed in photography I will discuss a series of photographs by nineteenth century photographer J.T. Zealy. The photographs were commissioned by scientist Louis Agassiz and show enslaved men and women (Doyle 2013:116). One of these images is showing a woman named Delia (Figure 31 and 32)[11]. Her upper body is shown naked and she is wearing some sort of skirt or piece of cloth hiding the rest of her body. She is facing the camera with a blank expression on her face. In the next photograph, she is depicted in profile. In 1975, these photographs of Delia, as well as daguerreotypes of other enslaved men and women (15 in total) were discovered at the Peabody Museum (Doyle 2013:114). They were taken twelve years after the invention of photography, in 1850, in South Carolina. The photographer J.T. Zealy was "hired by the notorious racist Louis Agassiz to produce a series of images that would visually demonstrate his theory that people of African descent belonged to a different species" (Doyle 2013:114).

Since then, those photographs have "become powerful emblems for the fraught relationship of the African American subject to the disciplinary (and disciplining) practice of photography" (Doyle 2013:114). In the photographs, the gaze of the white supremacist imperialist state becomes evident, and so does the gaze of the seemingly *objective scientist*: "Taking my reading of Agassiz's slave daguerreotypes as a sort of salvage job, these two texts – the photographs and Agassiz's biography – simply cannot be disentangled from one another" (Schneider in Smith 2012:222). These enslaved men and women not only became *types*, but were erotized. Displayed naked, "when the Victorians saw the female black, they saw her in terms of her buttocks and saw represented by the buttocks all the anomalies of her genitalia" (Gilman 1985:219). As Schneider argues, the photographs collapse the distinctions "that would delimit taxonomer from voyeur, empirics from erotics, and Agassiz as ethnographer from Agassiz as pornographer" (Schneider in Wallace and Smith 2012:214). The camera served not

[11] As an example, I have selected one of the photographs which is depicting Delia.

only as a tool to legitimize slavery but to legitimize the sexual exploitation of Black women. Under the disguise of science, early photography served to provide the racist and sexist society with *evidence* of Black women's inferiority and sexual deviance, resulting in the widespread depiction of the Black woman as jezebel.

Sarah Baartman, Delia, and countless other Black women, for centuries, have been displayed naked and photographed for pornographic purposes, as jezebels with an animalistic sexual drive. In *The Kitchen Table Series*, Weems confronts photography's past as tool to de-humanize Black women by photographing a Black woman's body (her own body) in a way that does not serve a white male gaze. During slavery, Black women did not legally own their bodies, they were sold as laborers and breeders: "For centuries the black woman has served as the primary pornographic 'outlet' for white men in Europe and America. We need only to think of the black women used as breeders, raped for the pleasure and profit of their owners" (Walker 1981:42). Taking photographs of their naked bodies, in addition, was another way of owning them. However, when taking one's own image, abolitionists such as Frederick Douglass believed one could restore agency by being in charge of the creation of self-portraits: "These photographs blur the divide between proprietor and property; Douglass's own self-possession is visually asserted most when others own and recognize this image" (Hill in Wallace and Smith 2012:49).

In *The Kitchen Table Series*, Weems becomes the proprietor of her own image and tackles the history of displaying and photographing naked Black female bodies in photography. By displaying her naked body in image nineteen (Figure 29), she challenges these racist and sexist histories of displaying Black women as nudes for pornographic purposes, reclaiming her body and her sexuality. In the photograph, we see her sitting with her back to us, her head tilted back, her hand grabbing her hair: "With her eyes closed and body hidden, the protagonist exudes comfort and relish in her sexual being" (Okobi 1998:65). She is enjoying a "moment of solitary sensuality" (65). She finally owns her body for her own pleasure, while the viewer does not see her sexual parts which have historically been displayed for the white male gaze. The photographs prior and after this image further contribute to her sexual liberation: In image eighteen (Figure 28), we see the protagonist standing near the wall with her right hand dangling over the birdcage and her left hand holding onto the chair, while holding a cigarette. She is wearing a white lace nightshirt, looking at the bird. We cannot see her face as it is hidden by the

lamp. In the next photograph (Figure 29), the birdcage is gone. In image 20 (Figure 30), the birdcage is there again, yet the bird is gone. The freed bird can be read as a metaphor, she is reclaiming her sexuality for herself, neither catering to her former partner nor to the white male gaze: The viewer cannot see her naked body and sexualize her, the focus is on her face and her expression instead. Other photographs from the series also hint to her sexual liberation, freed from the constraints of the white male gaze. In the first image (Figure 11), "Weems transforms the black woman as "sexual object" into "sexual being" (Okobi 19998:56). As Okobi analyzes, the protagonist looking directly at the viewer shows that the focus is on feminine pleasure; "the photograph illustrates a woman who delights not only in looking at herself, but also in the knowledge that she is being looked at and desired" (Okobi 1998:56). Unlike in the photograph of Delia (Figure 31 and 32), the woman in *The Kitchen Table Series* looks at the viewer with an investigating gaze, not a defeated one; she is fully clothed and becomes the proprietor of her own image, creating a counter-archive to the depictions of Black women as pornographic outlets.

In addition to the photographic representation of Black women as scientific and sexualized objects, they were depicted as the asexual, childless servant: the mammy. This part of my analysis will focus on *The Kitchen Table Series* as a counter-archive to the numerous depictions of Black women as mammies, denying Black motherhood. Enslaved women were often depicted with their white master's children in early daguerreotypes: "Mammy-and-child double portraits are perhaps the most complex and disturbing images of the antebellum period precisely because the women are picture in the material presence and repressed evidence of their bondage" (Liss 2009:94). These popular images ultimately stood for the master's status, showing the outcome of the "horrific patriarchy of slavery" (94). Like the images of naked women functioning as pornographic outlets, in these images, it also becomes evident that the women depicted have no claim to their bodies. They function as surrogate mothers[12], not permitted to have a family of their own, "since it was believed they would not be able to perform their 'domestic duties' in addition to their own doubled maternal work" (94). *Slave and Child* (Figure 33) from 1848 is an example of such a *mammy-and-child portrait*. The "fetishized, locketlike daguerreotype"

[12] Born into her role as enforced surrogate mother of her owner's form of oppression and servitude. If the figure of the mother in Western patriarchal culture already stands for extreme passivity and devalued love, the mammy is the double icon for sacrifice (94).

(94) shows a Black woman holding a white child. The Black woman is turned towards the child, while the child looks towards the photographer. The woman is wearing a headscarf that covers her hair and a dress that signifies domestic work:

> The headscarf worn by the typical mammy may have been the ultimate denouncement of African American ethnicity in the contrived caricature. Hair has been a significant item of concern and beautification for African and African American women for centuries, and the scarf negated any beauty potential to be found in an elaborate coiffure and its decoration with beads or thread. […] Hair itself was associated with meaning and metaphysical potentials. Black folklore suggests that hair can carry a person's essence (Harris in Willis 2010:168).

Her face is almost hidden and she seems to merge with the background, vanishing in the darkness, much like her status as an anonymous slave. The title *Slave and Child* not only turns the woman into an anonymous person, but denies her femininity. It "places the woman in a subhuman category outside the normal interpersonal relations designated by the words 'man, woman, and child'" (93). Not only is her femininity denied; those portraits also mark the lack of family portraits for Black families, as the women and mothers were violently enforced to become mothers to white children: "When a people's family and cultural history is marked by violation, disruption, and erasure, no such recorded visual lineage or ownership of those memories can be assumed" (96).

In *The Kitchen Table Series*, Weems also challenges the representations of Black motherhood, countering photographs that have depicted them as asexual mammies who had no agency over their body, reproduction, and image. Out of the 20 photographs of the series, five photographs show the daughter-mother relationship (Figure 22-26): In the first photograph of the woman and daughter-sequence (Figure 22), we see the protagonist sitting at the table alongside her daughter, both looking into the mirror and putting on lipstick. In the second photograph (Figure 23), the protagonist is sitting at the table, reading a book, while her daughter is standing behind her against the wall, her arms crossed. In the third photograph of the sequence (Figure 24), the protagonist leans against the table, looks at her daughter who is standing closer to the table, her head slightly tilted as she looks towards the protagonist. In the next photograph (Figure 25), both the protagonist and the daughter sit together at the table, reading their books. The last photograph shows the protagonist, her daughter and two other girls (Figure 26). The girls move quickly around the table while playing a card game and they appear slightly blurred. Only Weems is depicted unblurry, looking towards her daughter.

The series depicts a family portrait over the sequence of 20 images, filling in the gaps of the missing family portraits of early photography that only depicted Black women as surrogate mothers. While in the *mammy-and-child* portraits, the enslaved women had no right to their body and motherhood, *The Kitchen Table* series functions as a counter-archive. As discussed above, Weems is able to reclaim her body and *own her body*, which Black women have historically not been able to. In the tradition of Douglass and Truth, she is returning from "social death" of the legacy of slavery through photography. In regard to motherhood, she is returning from the historical depictions of Black women as surrogate mothers, backdrops in photographs, and status symbols to white masters. She herself is a mother, creating a family portrait and reclaiming subjectivity and her sexuality. The depiction of Black women as dignified was a huge aspect of the social movements and photography of the 1960s onward, which proclaimed "Black is Beautiful"[13], making Black people subject. Weems is creating images that show a woman who is her own authentic self and not a caricature. As hooks states, "early in her artistic development, she [Weems] was particularly inspired by DeCarava's visual representations of black subjects that invert the dominant culture's aesthetics, in which, informed by racist thinking, blackness was ichnographically seen as a marker of ugliness" (hooks 1995:66).

However, Weems later on moved away from documentary images, extending "DeCarava's legacy beyond the investment in creating positive images" (66). In her works, the influences of postmodernism, feminism, and the Black Arts movement become apparent, as the photographs and texts "push the viewer to resee – to rearrange – what he or she has once seen to be real, natural, or given: to re-see cultural structures of power and domination" (Raymond 2017:19). Weems is deconstructing the "given" by adding text to the images, writing down her – and the protagonist's – thoughts on motherhood. In accordance to the texts, she deconstructs the notion of motherhood of not just portraying a family album and a *positive image* of Black motherhood, but instead, *The Kitchen Table Series* pushes "the viewer to re-see" the cultural structures of power.

[13] In the late 1960s, blacks throughout the country celebrated black culture, proclaimed 'black is beautiful,' and flaunted black beauty by wearing Afro hairstyles (Craig 2002:13).

> In a contestation of traditional depiction of African-American mothers, Weems illustrates her central figure as an individual, rather than a paradigm of a "degenerative" ethnic group, or a symbol of "black pride", she refuses to offer an absolutely positive or negative portrayal of African-American women (Okobi 2008:62).

Black mothers have been depicted as mammies, and also as matriarchs. "While the mammy typifies the Black mother figure in White homes, the matriarch symbolizes the mother figure in Black homes. Just as the mammy represents the 'good' Black mother, the matriarch symbolizes the 'bad' Black mother" (Collins 2000:75). The matriarchs are depicted as aggressive, domineering and emasculating towards their male partners (175). The protagonist, in contrast to the mainstream representations, is not an overbearing matriarch at all: She does not even take notice of her daughter in three of the five photographs. Moreover, in the text, Weems points out how this stereotype has been forced onto her by her male partner: "She insisted that what he called domineering was a jacket being forced on her because he couldn't stand the thought of the inevitable shift in the balance of power […]" (Figure 40).

The notion of Black mothers as culprits of deteriorating Black families was chronicled in the 1964 *Moynihan Report*. Moynihan, an American sociologist, published a report that labeled Black women as matriarchs, implying "that those black women who worked and headed households were the enemies of black manhood" (hooks 2015:180). As Crenshaw points out, while the report was criticized for being racist, "few pointed out the sexism apparent in Moynihan's labeling Black women as pathological for their 'failure' to live up to a white female standard of motherhood" (Crenshaw 1989:139). The protagonist in *The Kitchen Table Series* calls out the harmful stereotype of the matriarch which is forced onto her. Moreover, she does not conform to the preferred white image of womanhood either: Instead, she deconstructs motherhood altogether, presenting an image of a feminist mother.

In *Feminist Art and the Maternal*, Andrea Liss states: "Feminist motherhood complicates the dominant institutionalized idea of motherhood" (Liss 2009:xvi). Furthermore, "Motherhood, especially feminist motherhood, confuses the normalized order of gender and power" (Liss 2009:xvi). Weems is depicting a woman who both stands against the racist, sexist representations of Black mothers, while also not conforming to conventional images and ideals of white motherhood. Instead, Weems is carving out a new definition along the lines of feminism. As American sociologist Tricia Rose said in an interview with Mark Dery, talking about feminist motherhood: "We need radical feminist models of pregnancy and motherhood. I

think feminist mothers are the most dangerous muthafuckahs out there; if I were to be really hardcore, I could say that feminists who refuse to have children ain't threatenin' shit after a certain point!" (Rose in Dery 1994:218-220)

5.2. The Representation of Black Womanhood in Cinema

The Kitchen Table Series not only addresses the problematic use of photography in the making of stereotypes for Black women, but also the role of cinema. As discussed in the previous chapter, Black women have been stereotyped as mammies and jezebels in photography, and cinema is a continuation of these stereotypes. In this chapter, I will examine how *The Kitchen Table Series* is a critique of mainstream cinema and of white feminist film criticism. The series also employs similar strategies like Black feminist filmmaker Julie Dash, which will be investigated.

During the early years of cinema, "the movies were a parade of embarrassing, insulting, demeaning caricatures – often offsprings of the rigid stereotypes of the minstrel shows that had been so popular in the nineteenth century" (Bogle 2019:38). Films like *Gone with the Wind* or the films in which Josephine Baker appeared in, show Black women as spectacles and servants, further solidifying the stereotypes. Josephine Baker's characters on film were "contained and defined mostly by the gazes of others" and "do not look, but are looked upon" (Callahan 2010:114). Baker exploited Europe's fascination with the "exotic" Black woman: "Content to 'exploit' white eroticization of black bodies, Baker called attention to the 'butt' in her dance routines" (hooks 1992:63). Even though she starred in her films, she was reduced to the object, the dancer, while her white male love interests ultimately chose the white woman[14]. She positions herself as a hypersexual woman who is no *marriage material*[15].

In addition to hypersexual images, the stereotype of the mammy was perpetuated, for example as in Hattie MacDaniels's character in *Gone with the Wind* (1939): "Most of the important black character actresses of the Depression era, such as Louise Beavers and Hattie

[14] The narratives of these films, as well as those of *Siren of the Tropics* (dir. Henri Etievant, 1927), *Princess Tam Tam* (dir. Edmond T. Greville, 1935), and *Fausse Alerte* (dir. Jacques de Baroncelli, 1945), tend to plot Baker's characters as isolated and excluded from the romance that frames the story (Francis in Callahan 2010:115).

[15] *Zou Zou, Princess Tam Tam* and *Papitou* can be understood through Shaw's concept of "racial erasure" as ultimately they are not acceptable as marriage partners compared with the white women who eventually are united with their love interests (Francis in Callahan 2010:115).

McDaniel were larger, browner women, who offered comfort and advice, solace and sympathy to white heroines" (Bogle 2019:105). They were "mothers without children (hooks 1992:119), portraying the "safe" Black woman to "nurture young white supremacists and run white supremacist households […]" (Harris Willis 2010:166).

Moving to contemporary cinema, the stereotypes still persist: "Contemporary films continue to place black women in two categories, mammy or slut, and occasionally a combination of the two" (hooks 1992:74). Even Black filmmakers who address Black female subjectivity, like Spike Lee does in *She's Gotta Have It*[16], they fail to represent a reclaimed image of Black womanhood. As hooks concludes, "sad to say, the black woman does not get 'it.'" (hooks 1992:75). Nola Darling, the film's heroine, is still embedded in Lee's "patriarchal filmic practices that mirror dominant patterns makes him the perfect black candidate for entrance to the Hollywood canon" (hooks 1992:126). While Nola might appear as a sexually liberated woman at first sight, it is debated whether or not she is raped at the end of the movie (Collins 2010:148): "Men disbelieve Nola's protestations and see her protest as serving to heighten the sexual pleasure of her male partner. In contrast, many women see her reaction as typical for those of a rape victim." (148). Hooks argues that Nola merely replaces white women's place as objects of desire, making Lee's film a "transference without transformation" (hooks 1992:126).

Mainstream cinema centers around a white male or a Black male gaze, exploiting Black women's bodies. Since I have already discussed how Weems presents a character who is subverting these stereotypes, I will now focus on her construction of the white male gaze and how Black feminist cinema has created an oppositional gaze, making Black women and spectators its subjects. *The Kitchen Table Series* addresses universal concerns about love, relationships and gender through the eyes of a Black woman. In an interview with hooks, Weems states: "Well, you know, one of the things that I was thinking about was whether it might be possible to use black subjects to represent universal concerns" (Weems in hooks 1995:77). Like in Not *Manet's Type*, Weems uses her body as a *stand-in*, as a "character": "The character helps to reveal something that is more complicated about the lives of women" (Moss 2016). By using

[16] "The contemporary film that has most attempted to address the issue of black female sexual agency is Spike Lee's *She's Gotta Have It*" (hooks 1992:75)

a Black woman to portray universal concerns, she creates images that stand against the perceived notion of whiteness as norm. In *The Kitchen Table Series*, Weems specifically challenges the notion of cinema as only addressing white, male viewers – ultimately erasing the Black female subject and viewer. As she points out in an interview with hooks, the series seeks to address the "gaps" in Laura Mulvey's text on the male gaze in cinema. In the essay, Mulvey discusses the male spectator, yet only touches upon the female spectator (as a victim of the gaze), and leaves out the Black female spectator wholly:

> After thinking about postmodernism and all this stuff about fractured selves, and so on, when I was constructing the Kitchen Table series, Laura Mulvey's article "Visual and Other Pleasures" came out, and everybody and their mama was using it, talking about the politics of the gaze, and I kept thinking of the gaps in her text, the way in which she had considered black female subjects (Weems in hooks 1995:84).

The Kitchen Table Series highlights the gaze and creates a space "in which Black women are looking back […]" (85). Like Mulvey, Weems is addressing the male gaze in her images but she also addresses white feminist film criticism's exclusion of Black female spectators: "Throughout American history, the racial imperialism of whites has supported the custom of scholars using the term 'women' even if they are referring solely to the experience of white women" (hooks 2015:8). In "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema", Mulvey only refers to white women, and in reaction to this, hooks wrote her essay on the "oppositional gaze": "Her [Laura Mulvey's] piece was the catalyst for me to write my piece on black female spectators, articulating theoretically exactly what you were doing in the *Kitchen Table series*" (hooks 1995:85). As hooks points out, *The Kitchen Table Series* is a visualization of hooks's concept of the oppositional gaze: It is a visualization of the Black women looking back and of Black female subjectivity.

Hooks asserts that the oppositional gaze is highly political: "As Black people in America have been denied their right to the gaze during slavery (hooks 1992:115). Consequently, "the 'gaze' has been a site of resistance for colonized black people globally" (116). When Black people had the opportunity to watch films, critical spectators developed this oppositional gaze as a site of interrogation: "Critical black female spectatorship emerges as a site of resistance only when individual black women actively resist the imposition of dominant ways of knowing and looking" (128). Black people "responded to these looking relations by developing

independent Black cinema" (117). Similarly, Weems is creating images that are motivated by this oppositional gaze, countering the images created in white, mainstream cinema.

The cinematic gaze has historically been a white male gaze. One of the fundamental questions, then, for Black feminist cinema and film criticism is "how the object of the gaze can reclaim the gaze" (Francis in Callahan 2010:113). Black women filmmakers such as Julie Dash took this question as point of departure for their filmmaking practice: "When black women relate to our bodies, our sexuality, ways in that place erotic recognition, desire, pleasure, and fulfillment at the center of our efforts to create radical black female subjectivity, we can make new and different representations of ourselves as sexual subjects" (hooks 1992:76). Black women have been "cinematically 'gaslighted'" (hooks 1992:120). For most of mainstream cinema's history, Black women filmmakers reclaimed their image and created movies where Black women spectators do not need an oppositional gaze. Black feminist filmmakers and theory not only illuminates the oppression of Black women, but "should address the receptivity and articulation of a black female psychic and social space in cinema, and do so in a way that is responsive to the idea of black women as both consumers and producers of cultural texts" (Francis in Callahan 2010:99).

Independent filmmaker Julie Dash's films *Illusions* (1982) and *Daughters of the Dust* (1991) are examples of films in which Black women critically look back. As hooks points out, Dash watched mainstream Hollywood movies "from that critical politized standpoint that did not want to be seduced by narratives reproducing her negation", for the "pleasure of deconstructing them" (hooks 1992:126). Dash's films are able to subvert ideologies because she makes independent cinema – her films do not have to be as economically viable as mainstream films, which, according to Kracauer, do not have the power to truly subvert because of these economic interests. *Daughters of the Dust* is significant in that it is the first feature-length film by an African American woman filmmaker and it places Black women at the center of the narrative. Due to its stylistic similarities, I will discuss Dash's earlier short film *Illusions* (1982) in regard to *The Kitchen Table Series*. *Illusions* "brilliantly exposes Hollywood's racism and its grandiose assumption of itself as representing the American nation" (Kaplan 1997:19) and identifies Hollywood "as a space of knowledge production that has enormous power" (hooks 1992:128-129). The film is set in 1942 and stylistically filmed like film noir: "Through the use of black-and-white cinematography, low-key (and low budget) lighting, mirrors, and the glass-

paneled door through which silhouettes appear, the mise-en-scene conveys a sense of repressed consciousness through the ubiquitous presence of shadows" (Ryan 2004:1338). As Ryan asserts, film noir techniques suggest "psychological dualism or conflict" which might hint to the main protagonist's "psychological state as a Black woman passing for White" (Ryan 2004:1338).

Mignon Dupree (Lonette McKee), a Black woman passing for white, is working at a Hollywood Studio during war times, making U.S. propaganda films. There are many narratives within the film: Mignon passing for white and being discovered; the film studio's exploitation of a Black woman's voice for a white woman; the power of white men working in Hollywood; the creation of "history" through films; the construction and deconstruction of the white male gaze, and Black women's resistance to all kinds of oppression. In a speech, Mignon tackles the problematic representation of Black people to the singer Esther Jeeter, who has been hired to lend her voice to a white actress for a production:

> The real history, the history that most people will remember and believe in is what they see on the screen… I wanted to be where history was made, where it is rewritten on film…People make films about themselves, what they want…Here We're nothing but props in their stories, musical props or dancing props or comic relief (Dash 1982: 28', my own transcription).

As discussed, Black women's representation in film was limited to certain stereotypes – the mammy, the jezebel, the sapphire and others. Mignon's speech is both intra- and extra-diegetic: She addresses both Esther and the audience, speaking within the scene as well as an omnipotent narrator, from the perspective of a Black feminist filmmaker. The film thus works on a meta-level as well; on the one hand, there is the narrative that evolves around Mignon, working at a Hollywood studio in the 1940s in the style of film noir; in addition, there is Dash's commentary of Black women in Hollywood via the voice-over: "Thus, even as it appears to conform to them, *Illusions* exposes and challenges several trends in Hollywood cinema that together erase Black people's social presence and/or sanction their subordinate social status" (Ryan 2004:1334).

Another element that challenges the assumed conforming to classical Hollywood cinema is the construction of the gaze. Because, unlike the film noir of the 1940s, Dash deconstructs the white male gaze by confronting it on several occasions. As Mulvey argued, the male gaze objectifies the white woman on screen. In *Illusions*, the blonde secretary is depicted as this typical film noir "bombshell" (Ryan 2004:1337), yet the camera refuses to capture her as that: "Although the blonde's provocative hip-swinging walk is meant for the consumption of

the white male gaze, the camera relegates that reaction to the periphery" (Ryan 2004:1337). In addition, we see Esther and Mignon laughing as the blonde woman walks by, signaling their shared knowledge of the situation of the white woman performing as a bombshell for the white male gaze (Ryan 2004:1337). The camera's gaze, instead, is fixated on the Black women's facial expressions. In one of the first scenes, Esther's face is in focus for several minutes while she sings (Figure 35); in the last scene, Mignon's face is in focus, framed in a mirror, while she is talking to Lieutenant Bedsford (Ned Bellamy) (Figure 36), who just discovered that she is a Black woman. The camera does not, like in film noir, depict the Black women like white women as passive objects of desire and fragment their bodies, or as hypersexualized or asexual female Black stereotypes. Instead, it shows their facial expressions and gives insight into the complexity of Black women's experiences and thoughts.

The film questions Hollywood's role in the making of history and how the erasure of authentic Black characters has an impact on Black people's lives. In the last scene, when confronted by the white male Lieutenant about her Blackness, she reveals the powers of Hollywood in the making of Otherness:

> I never once saw my boys fighting over there for this country in a film, in a picture, making this country, because your scissor and your paste methods have eliminated my participation in the history of this country and the influence of that screen cannot be overestimated, do you understand me? (Dash 1982:31'47)

Illusions ends with her sitting down in the producer's chair, making clear that she is there to stay and fight. As Ryan noted, *Illusions* is not an autobiographical film, but, "it both constitutes and is informed by Black women's (collective) social biography" (Ryan 2004:1332). The film, disguised as film noir through its cinematography, inserts itself into the canon of film history, "in order to disrupt that history's monocultural hegemony" (Ryan 2004:1334).

The Kitchen Table Series similarly addresses the subject of Hollywood and the gaze. In my analysis, I will first examine the deconstruction of the white male gaze in the images and compare the construction of a Black female gaze in the photographs to the mise-en-scenes in Dash's *Illusions*. *The Kitchen Table Series,* like *Illusions*, is constructed in the style of a film noir: The combination of the black-and-white photograph, the bright lamp as well the props (alcohol, cigarettes, card games) evoke the imagery of 1940s film noir. Especially the lamp is reminiscent of interrogating rooms in the detective stories. But in Weems's version of film noir,

like in *Illusions*, it is not the white male who is the hero of the film and whose gaze we share; it is the Black woman's gaze – the gaze of the "Other", the invisible, the hypervisible, the erased. She becomes the "screen surrogate" opposed to the white men in film noir who traditionally control "the film fantasy" which leads to the spectator identifying with the male character (Mulvey 2016:7). The Black woman in *The Kitchen Table Series* is the "screen surrogate" because she sits at the head of the table. The photographs are composed in such a way, that the woman sits in the middle of a "golden triangle" (in 15 out of the 20 photographs). Furthermore, the light of the lamp hanging from above illuminates her face throughout, giving away her emotions. In addition to the composition which centers her, in two photographs, the woman is looking at us directly: In image one (Figure 11) and image seventeen (Figure 27). In the very first image, we see the Weems looking at us directly, while a man is leaning against her, his head turned down and towards her. He is wearing a fedora and a black suit; almost like a shadow, he is standing behind her. She, however, is not interested in his presence. Instead, she looks at the viewer with an interrogating, yet knowing gaze. In front of her are a mirror and two glasses with presumably alcohol, a bottle of liquor as well as cigarettes. The mirror points to vanity, as well as to beauty standards she is trying to fulfill. However, she is ignoring the mirror, looking past it, as to say that while aware of beauty standards, she does not care about it too much.

Confidently, she looks directly into the camera, challenging Mulvey's notion of the male gaze and becoming the "screen surrogate". Because, as hooks asserts, Black female spectators deconstruct this notion of Mulvey's binary opposition of "woman as image, man as bearer of the look" (hooks 1992:123). In mainstream film, women are fetishized and their bodies fragmented (both Black and white women's bodies; albeit the controlling images differ). Weems's body, however, is hidden by the mirror and cut off by the table and the man, who is usually the "bearer of the look". The man just becomes a bystander much like the male characters in *Illusions*. In *Illusions*, the camera always focuses on the Black women's facial expressions. When Mignon talks to Lieutenant Bedsford, it is her face we see throughout; he becomes a bystander (Figure 36). In terms of breaking the fourth wall and looking at the audience directly, in one of the beginning scenes, Esther sings and looks toward Mignon and the producers, yet it is framed in such a way that she is directly looking at us (Figure 35). The background is black, while the light illuminates her face. The scene of her singing is dramatically cut. In the next scene, we see a white woman actress who Esther is lending her

voice. The abrupt cut symbolizes the violent exploitation of Black women's contributions and labor. Esther's breaking with the fourth wall confronts the viewer with this uncomfortable truth. She is displaying, as Terri Simone Francis has discussed in her essay called a "scary subjectivity":

> The black woman character becomes a "scary" viewer when she either addresses the camera or fellow audience members […] By implication, she threatens the racialized symbolic order in the cinema, as well as the order of critical approaches in traditional feminist and film scholarship, and the limited roles deemed possible for black women's life beyond the screen […] (Francis in Callahan 2010:102-103).

By looking back, by not being objectified by a white male gaze, Esther/Dash is threatening the "racialized symbolic order in the cinema" which turned Black women into caricatures or did not show them at all, as for example in film noir. As Francis writes, the "scary subject" uses strategies "to interrupt the normal, expected entrancement of a movie audience" (102). Similarly, Weems is addressing the viewer, the participant, by seating us at the table throughout the series and by returning the gaze back at us. She is turning the violent, oppressive, white male gaze around. In image seventeen (Figure 27), the protagonist leans forward and looks at the viewer with an interrogating gaze. Both *Illusions* and *The Kitchen Table Series* offer an alternative history of cinema, one in which Black women are not invisible or stereotyped. By using the stylistic elements of film noir, they create a counter-archive and a space of healing for Black women while also confronting white viewers with the "uncomfortable truth" of the exploitation of Black female bodies.

5.3. Singing the Blues: The Roots of (Black) Feminism

The Kitchen Table Series has both been displayed with and without text panels. The text serves as an addition as well stands on its own. Like the extradiegetic speech in *Illusions*, the text helps illuminate Black women's oppression and gives Black women a voice. This voice is informed by the blues, as Weems points out: "I'm very interested in ideas about blues and jazz, that expressive musical culture. That's where I function" (Weems in hooks 1995:89). By adding text to the photos, the meaning is changed. As Stuart Hall stresses, meaning is not fixed: The meaning of a photograph "does not lie exclusively in the image, but in the conjunction of image

and text" (Hall 1997:228). In the following, I will analyze how the texts, as well as the texts in conjunction with the images, thematically and formally echo the blues tradition.

The roots of the blues developed in the post-slavery spiritual tradition, giving "musical expression to the new social and sexual realities encountered by African Americans as free women and men" (Davis 1999:29). The blues is a tool to deconstruct, developed out of Signifyin(g): "Derrida did not invent deconstruction, we did! That is what the blues and signifying are all about" (Gates in Wallace 2016:627-28). Language has been "rewrought and recast, playfully coaxed toward new meanings, and sometimes ironically made to signify the opposite of its literal meaning" (Davis 1999:249), and ultimately was "ritualized in the musical tradition, from the field hollers and work songs to spirituals and the blues […]" (249). The blues helped construct "a new black consciousness" and artists such as Gertrude "Ma" Rainey and Bessie Smith "blatantly contradicted mainstream ideological assumptions regarding women and being in love" (Davis 1999:38).

Collins and Davis point out that the blues is an early Black feminist practice. Collins writes about the blues: "When Black women sing the blues, we sing our own personalized, individualistic blues while simultaneously expressing the collective blues of African American women" (Collins 2000:106). The blues marks the beginning of Black women's oral culture because due to Black women's illiteracy, the recordings represent "the first permanent documents exploring a working-class Black women's standpoint […]" (106). Women did not have to be literate to sing and listen to the Blues, just as they did not have to be literate to "read" a photograph. Furthermore, like photography, the blues is a tool to dismantle stereotypical images of Black women in mainstream culture: "The lyrics sung by many of the Black women blues singers challenge the externally defined controlling images used to justify Black women's objectification as the Other" (106).

In *Blues legacies and Black feminism: Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith and Billie Holiday*, Angela Davis examines how female blues singers of the early twentieth century explored feminist issues in their music. Not Black men, but Black women recorded the blues first (Davis 1999:18). The music serves as "a rich terrain for examining a historical feminist consciousness that reflected the lives of working-class black communities" (21) Against popular assumptions, Davis argues, the historical origins of feminism are not white: Long before the 1960s consciousness-raising groups, Black women have challenged violence in relationships

and voiced their need for independence. During a time, when white feminists fought for voting rights for white-middle class women only, Black women already "challenged the notion that women's "place" was in the domestic sphere" (38) and worked to deconstruct the status quo of patriarchal ideology altogether: "The female figures evoked in women's blues are independent women free of the domestic orthodoxy of the prevailing representations of womanhood through which female subjects of the era were constructed" (41). They questioned the institution of marriage and were in control of their sexuality "in ways that exploit neither their partners nor themselves" (43). For example, in Bessie Smith's "Young Woman's Blues", the protagonist is not interested in marriage, but in sexual pleasure: "No time to marry, no time to settle down./I'm a young woman and ain't done runnin' 'round" (Smith in Davis 1999:46). As Davis notes, "these blues women had no qualms about announcing female desire" (55). The blues focuses on domestic violence against women, which is "an appropriate topic of women's blues" (56). On the other hand, it highlights "friendship, sisterhood, love, and solidarity between women" (81). The accompanying text of *The Kitchen Table Series*, in its entirety, is thematically and formally constructed like a blues song: It is a about love, sexuality, violence, the end of a relationship, female friendship, and a woman's desire for freedom and independence and using the techniques of the blues to deliver these topics. First, I will discuss the thematic similarities of *The Kitchen Table Series* with traditional blues songs.

The Kitchen Table Series, like the blues, does not romanticize love: "Fearless, unadorned realism is a distinctive feature of the blues. […] Their representations of sexual relationships are not constructed in accordance with the sentimentality of the American popular song tradition" (Davis 1999:53). In the very first texts accompanying the *Kitchen Table Series*, Weems writes: "They walked, not hand in hand, but rather side by side in the twinkle of August/September sky, looking sidelong at one another, thanking their lucky stars with fingers crossed" (Figure 37). The beginning of their relationship is already pointing out that they start out their relationship with their "fingers crossed", not romanticizing the other, but being aware that there might not be a "happily-ever-after". In the second photograph of the series (Figure 12), we see Weems's protagonist sitting at the table with her man, both looking at each other, playing a game of cards. We can see his cards, but we cannot look into her cards. She has an investigating look, as if she is examining if he is worthy of her. As Okobi points out: "As a game partner, however, this man acts as not only companion, but adversary and opponent" (Okobi 1998:58). Seated at the kitchen

table, under the lamp which evokes the notion of an investigation room, the man and the relationship are under investigation – as are relationships between men and women everywhere. As Weems herself said about *The Kitchen Table Series*, she is investigating domestic and gendered spaces (Weems in Miller and Ravich 2011:1'38).

Like in the blues, the protagonist is an independent woman "free of the domestic orthodoxy of the prevailing representations of womanhood" (Davis 1999:41). Motherhood is seldom a topic in the blues, which is not a "rejection of motherhood as such, but rather suggests that blues women found the mainstream cult of motherhood irrelevant to the realities of their lives" (41). Weems's protagonist does not conform to either the cult of motherhood nor traditional ideas of femininity. Out of the 20 photographs, in only one (Figure 13) there is a notion of domesticity (besides the photographs with her daughter): The family meal. In every other photograph, there are either alcoholic beverages and bottles, cigarettes, game cards, books or a telephone on the table. Alcohol, cigarettes and cards are seen as *vices* and not deemed "feminine". Blues singer Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, for example, "celebrates women's desires for alcohol and good times and their prerogative as the equals of men to engage in acts of infidelity" (52) in "Barrel House Blues": "Papa likes his sherry, mama likes her port/ Papa likes to shimmy, mama likes to sport/ Papa likes his bourbon, mama likes her gin/Papa likes his outside women, mama like her outside men" (Rainey in Davis 1999:52). Rainey questions the institution of marriage and monogamy "with the kind of attitude that is usually gendered as male" (43).

The protagonist in the *Kitchen Table Series* expresses similar attitudes: Not only does Weems's protagonist drink, smoke and play cards, she also feels that while monogamy is important, she does not value it too much because it is "based on private property, an order defying human nature"(Figure 39). Her partner has a similar approach to monogamy. Ultimately, she cheats on her partner: "He cried big crocodile tears at the thought of another mule in his stall. So hurt by her infidelity, he felt Frankie and Johnny might have to be played out for real. This was the beginning and the end of things" (Figure 44). This scene reveals the double standard in society: men are allowed to cheat, whereas women are not.

While he was initially "grateful for such generosity" (Figure 39), he ultimately turns violent against her:

> No really, she fussed, all day long; he was worthless, not a man but a chump, couldn't fight his way out of a wet paper bag, she fucked with him all day long, and all day long he quietly took it all in, and then he quietly exploded. Before she could collect her wit or make a dash for the door, he seized her and hung her upside-down out of their seven-story apartment window and said, "Talk shit now, goddamnit!
> *One day he placed a match-box on her clothes. It was time to book.* (Figure 49)

The text about the man's violence is juxtaposing the photograph of the protagonist standing by the bird cage, feeding the bird[17]. The scene is quiet and calm, while the text elaborates on the life-threatening violence she is experiencing. Examining physical and emotional abuse was a recurring topic in the blues: "The performances of the classic blues women – especially Bessie Smith – were one of the few cultural spaces in which a tradition of public discourse on male violence had been previously established." (Davis 1999:56). The song "Yes, Indeed He do" by Bessie Smith, for example, examines male violence:

> And when I ask him where he's been, he grabs a rocking chair
> Then he knocks me down and says, "It's just a little love lick, dear."
> […]
> "And I wouldn't give a quarter for another man like him
> Gee, ain't it great to have a man that's crazy over you?
> Oh, do my sweet, sweet daddy love me? Yes, indeed he do. (Smith in Davis 1999:57)

The blues addresses misogynist violence. What is striking, however, is not only the fact that it is addressing the taboo topic of violence against women in the first place, but also how the topic is formally delivered. In the following, I will analyze the texts of *The Kitchen Table Series* in regard to formal similarities with the Blues.

While violence is a serious matter, blues singers like Bessie Smith deliver the topic in a humorous and analytical way: "Smith's sarcastic presentation of the lyrics transforms observations on an unfaithful, abusive, and exploitative lover into a scathing critique of male violence" (57). Especially the line "Gee, ain't it great to have a man that's crazy over you?" stands out: By posing this rhetorical question, she highlights her awareness of the situation makes the misogynist violence obvious to the listener. Leading up to the text about the violent outburst of her partner, the narrator in *The Kitchen Table Series* uses humor in numerous occasions, highlighting the partner's toxic masculinity: "Ha. A woman's duty! H! A punishment

[17] Since it is unclear which text panel follows which image on DIA's website, I took this information from Okobi 1998:60.

for Eve's sin was more like it. Ha. […] He wasn't working like she was, but ends meeting, ha!" (Figure 46). By laughing at the situation, she shows awareness of her worth and ultimately, frees herself from that situation: "At 38 she was beginning to feel the fulness of her woman self, wanted once again to share it all with a man who could deal with the multitude of her being" (50).

In both the photographs (Figure 18-21) and the text Weems shows one of the origins of the woman's strength: Friendship among women. As Davis asserts, "At the same time, there are songs that highlight friendship, sisterhood, love, and solidarity between women" (81). Several songs by Bessie Smith and Gertrude "Ma" Rainey address the sharing of "difficulties in love" with other women (103). The emphasis the "dialectical relation between the female subject and the community of women within which this individuality is imagined"(102). For example, "I Used to Be Your Sweet Mama" by Bessie Smith directly addresses an imagined female subject : "All you women understand/What it is to be in love with a two-time man/ The next time he calls me sweet mama in his lovin' way/This is what I'm going to say/"I used to be your sweet mama, sweet papa/But now I'm just as sour as can be." (Smith in Davis 1999:104).

The Blues, as Davis argues, is thus a forerunner of 1960s consciousness raising groups and the slogan "the personal is political":

> In the early 1970s, women began to speak publicly about their experiences of rape, battery, and the violation of their reproductive rights. Obscured by a shroud of silence, these assaults against women traditionally had been regarded as a fact of private life to be shielded at all costs from scrutiny in the public sphere. That this cover-up would no longer be tolerated was the explosive meaning behind feminists' defiant notion that "the personal is political" (Davis 1999:55-56).

Angela Davis points out, how 1960s feminist consciousness raising groups employed another method that was used by Black female blues singers before: The "call-and-response" technique:

> A process similar to the consciousness-raising strategies associated with the 1960s women's liberation movement unfolds in these songs, which are conversations among women about male behavior in which the traditional call-and-response structure of West African-based music takes on a new feminist meaning (93).

This call-and-response-technique stems from the blues' origins in religious sermons, as blues performances request the audience's participation (31). This request to respond and participate in women's blues was "a powerful site for the construction of working-class consciousness and

one of the only arenas in which working-class black women could become aware of the deeply social character of their personal experiences" (94). Giving advice to an imagined community is an essential part of women's blues (96). For example, in "Trust No Man", Gertrude "Ma" Rainey sings:

> I want all you women to listen to me/Don't trust your man no further than your eyes can see/I trusted mine with my best friend/But that was the bad part in the end/Trust no man, trust no man, no further than your eyes can see/ I said trust no man, no further than your eyes can see/ He'll tell you that he loves you and swear it is true/ The very next minute he'll turn his back on you/Ah, trust no man, no further than your eyes can see (Rainey in Davis 1999:96).

How does the *Kitchen Table Series* employ this early form of feminist consciousness raising call-and-response? On the image-level, she addresses the imagined viewer through her gaze: In image one (Figure 11) and image seventeen (Figure 27), she looks at the viewer directly, asking the viewer to empathize. Furthermore, by seating us at the table with her, we directly participate. In the four images that picture her with her mother and girlfriends (Figure 18-21), the importance of female bonds is foregrounded. After the breakup, she seeks out her girlfriends: In image eight (Figure 18), we see the protagonist sitting at the table, her face covered in her hand and her two girlfriends consoling her. One of the women is standing next to her and touching her shoulder, while the other is touching her hand. In the two following photographs (Figure 19 and 20), the protagonist is playing cards with her friends, smoking and drinking. Her facial expression is calm and even amused. One of her friends is Black while the other one is white, pointing out a solidarity among women of all ethnicities and the shared heartbreak, contributing to the universality that Weems intended in *The Kitchen Table Series*. In the image following the triptych with her girlfriends, the protagonist's mother is combing her hair at the kitchen table (Figure 21). The intimate scene of her mother grooming her hair has a special importance as it is a sign of resilience and community: "In order to understand the social meanings of straightened hair, it is necessary to view grooming practices as many black women saw them, as personal actions that could be taken to win respect despite living in a hostile environment" (Craig 2002:30). The protagonist seeks out comfort away from her violent partner. In the text, her mother gives her advice:

> Seeking clarity and purpose, she spoke about the problems with her momma who said, "There's a difference between men and women. I can't tell ya what to do. But I can tell you that I sided with men so long I forgot women had a side. Truth slapped me so hard up-side my head, I cried for days, got so I couldn't wash my own behind. Shonuff blue. Biggest fool in the world. Turning my back on friends for a piece of man. Oh sure, I've had a man or tow – I mean with a capital "M" – but like a good friend, hard to come by. …Ya gotta give a little to get a little, that's the story of life (Figure 43).

Although the mother's advice is directed at the protagonist, it is also directed at the reader. Speaking in the first person, the mother talks to the reader in direct speech. Similarly to Gertrude "Ma" Rainey's lines in "Trust No Man", the mother tells her to be careful and not neglect her friendships for "a piece of man". In "Trust No Man", Rainey is addressing the listener directly. In the text accompanying the photograph, the mother is addressing the protagonist – yet also the viewer. The mother's direct speech directly addresses the viewer, "you". This form of indirection, of Signifyin(g), is called "loud-talking". According to Henry Louis Gates, "one successfully loud-talks by speaking to a second person remarks in fact directed at a third person, at a level just audible to the third person" (Gates 2014:82). This third person is the reader and viewer. Furthermore, Gates describes loud-talking as "obscuring the addressee" and "naming" (82). While the advice is meant for the protagonist, by choosing the direct speech directed towards the reader, the text really is directed at the reader. By addressing the reader in both text and image, Weems reels us in, and like in the blues, creates a work that is personal, yet also expressive of a collective experience.

6. Conclusion

"Because today we are the masters of our own portraiture/ Where pictures mean people, mean progress/ mean process, mean protest, mean the project of/ vision-making, the project of democracy-making,/ For a people to be rendered visible, indivisible, vivid and vibrant as all the glass we carry,/ We cannot just have a vision of justice./ We must be able to envision ourselves in that vision/ for justice to be served,/ For the right to representation that we all deserve" (Amanda Gorman, *Pictures and Progress* in Lewis 2019:33).

"She was trying to be a good woman, a compadre, a pal, a living-doll and she was working." (*The Kitchen Table Series,* Figure 41)

"Now she is busy pasting Audre Lorde's words on the cabinet over the kitchen sink" (Alice Walker, *You Can't Keep a Good Woman Down* 1981:46)

In the short story "Coming Apart By Way of Introduction to Lorde, Teish and Gardner" in *You Can't Keep a Good Woman Down* (1981), Alice Walker describes a woman who, through feminism and Black feminism, finds her voice, and teaches her Black male partner to see the intersectional oppressions Black women are facing. Black feminist thought has been a site of healing for Black women, a tool to reclaim their bodies and their image. Especially in regard to the controlling images, Black feminist thought gave a framework with which to deconstruct stereotypes and create new definitions.

Working with photography, Carrie Mae Weems uses a medium that has historically played a crucial part in the oppression of Black folks. Photography was invented partly to *document the Orient* and to photograph "the Other". In addition, the technology itself had a racist bias, making it more complicated to develop Black skin on film. Photography's assumed neutrality was used in nineteenth-century pseudo sciences to document some sort of inferiority based on Black people's bodies. In addition to the display for scientific purposes, Black women's bodies were sexualized and served as pornographic outlets for Victorian society. As Stuart Hall pointed out, Black people are depicted as stereotypes, for example in photography. Ultimately, society executes hegemonial power through the creation of such photographs.

However, photography also offers the potential to create corrective images: "We must envision ourselves within that vision for justice to be served, for the right of representation that we all deserve" (Gorman in Lewis 2019:33). Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Black photographers have created images that portray Black women as authentic, complex

people instead of stereotypes such as the mammy, jezebel and sapphire, to name a few. The Black Arts Movement and the feminist movement furthermore created art which combined aesthetics with political activism. However, due to intersectional discrimination, Black women were excluded from both the antiracist and feminist movements. In the 1970s, women like Audre Lorde, Kimberlé Crenshaw, bell hooks, Angela Davis and Michele Wallace as well as writers such as Alice Walker and Toni Morrison fought back by highlighting the intersectional oppression.

Carrie Mae Weems, who started photographing in the 1970s, was influenced by the works of Black photographers, feminist activism and art, as well as Black feminist thought. This thesis attempted to demonstrate how Weems's series *Not Manet's Type* and *The Kitchen Table Series* are a reaction to the stereotypical images created for Black women in mainstream media. In addition, the photographs show the influences from counter-cultural movements, as I compared her works to the works of other Black photographers and Black women artists.

In the analysis of *Not Manet's Type*, two aspects were examined: First of all, it was examined how beauty ideologies were established, especially in the modernist art of Picasso and Manet. Second, the work hints at how Black women were excluded from the art historical canon; yet through Black feminist thought and art production, Black women were able to render themselves visible again. Throughout the series, the protagonist is depicted in the reflection of her mirror. The mirror evokes voyeurism as well as symbolizing Western beauty ideologies. Even though she is nude, the viewer cannot see her body parts explicitly like in early photography when women were displayed completely naked to serve the white male gaze. Thus, Weems is subverting the white male gaze and the availability of Black female bodies. Furthermore, Weems tackles the representation of Black women in Modern Art. In the paintings of Picasso and Manet, Black women were represented as backdrops and servants, functioning only to heighten white women's sexuality through their opposing Blackness. In *Not Manet's Type*, Weems recalls these representations while at the same time, making the Black woman the protagonist of the images, elevating the Black female from object of desire to subject. Using her body as an object, Weems performs objecthood in order to explore social issues, a technique from feminist performance art. Her body becomes an "transhistorical avatar", as a stand-in for all the Black models in art that have been erased and fetishized.

Michele Wallace, in her essay "Why are There No Great Black Artists", highlights how feminist art history has excluded Black women artists. *Not Manet's Type* also alludes to the importance of Black female art creation as a way to escape the narrow representations. "I took a tip from Frida/who from her bed painted incessantly – beautifully/ while Diego scaled the scaffolds/ to the top of the world" (Figure 4 and 5). No longer a model, she is becoming an artist, having full agency over her representation. Looking to other role models and forming a community is a crucial aspect, as Audre Lorde discusses in *The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House* (1979), stating that community-building is key in order to defy the patriarchy. I then compared *Not Manet's Type* to Faith Ringgold's *The French Collection* (1991), who likewise tackles the period of modernism in Paris. In Ringgold's twelve story quilts, she chronicles the life of a fictional character who comes to Paris to become an artist. Ringgold humorously subverts the artist-model relationship and the status of while male geniuses such as Picasso. Both Weems and Ringgold center their works around Black female subjects and highlight how through Black feminist artistic production, the art historical canon can be deconstructed and Black women can create corrective images.

Weems's most iconic work, *The Kitchen Table Series* (1990), is the representation of a Black woman's individual life which appeals to a collective consciousness. The 20 photographs and fourteen text panels focus on a Black woman's life, as it is played out around the kitchen table. Weems again uses her body as *stand-in*, not creating an autobiographical work, but like in *Not Manet's Type*, functioning as a "transhistorical avatar" for Black women's experiences with sexism and racism. I analyzed the work in regard to three different aspects: Photography, cinema and the blues. She tackles the representations formed in mainstream culture, as well as applying techniques from counter-cultural art movements and utilizing photography. In the first subchapter, I investigated how she reckons with the racist, sexist history of photography. Looking back to pseudo-scientific and pornographic depictions of Black women in the works of nineteenth-century *scientists* to early *mammy-and-child* portraits, *The Kitchen Table Series* works as a corrective image in two ways: Reclaiming the Black female body in regard to a) sexuality and b) motherhood. Her naked body is hidden from the viewer, which stands in stark contrast to Black women photographed in the nineteenth-century *scientific* portraits. Second, the *mammy-and-child* portraits are emblems of the lack of family portraits for Black families as well as another reminder that Black women had no claim to their bodies. By making a series of

photographs showing a mother and her child, she creates a counter-archive to these early portraits. However, she goes further than merely depicting Black motherhood: She critiques motherhood in order to show the patriarchal structures it is based in. Employing a feminist aesthetic to push the viewer to "re-see the given", her texts point to the problematic stereotype of the matriarchs which the protagonist's partner projects onto her. Instead, Weems is escaping the narrow definitions of motherhood and presents a new, radical definition: feminist motherhood.

In the second subchapter, I investigated *The Kitchen Table Series* in regard to cinema. As mainstream cinema has created and perpetuated stereotypical images of Black women, Black women had to develop an "oppositional gaze" in order enjoy the films, according to bell hooks. This oppositional gaze was the point of departure for Black feminist independent cinema, making Black women subjects. Julie Dash's films *Illusions* (1982) and *Daughters of the Dust* (1991) are examples of films that employ the oppositional gaze. *Illusions*, like *The Kitchen Table Series*, used the stylistic markers of film noir. *The Kitchen Table* evokes the notion of film noir due to its black-and-white photography and the bright lamp which illuminates the scene like a detective's investigation room. In "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema", feminist film critic Laura Mulvey examined the representation of women in film noir and concluded that the films are constructed for the male gaze. In reaction to the exclusion of Black women, bell hooks coined the term "oppositional gaze"; Weems, in reaction to Mulvey's essay created *The Kitchen Table Series*. The series thus functions as both a reaction to the objectification and erasure of Black women in cinema and also, is a reaction to white feminism. *Illusions* and in *The Kitchen Table Series* make the Black woman the main protagonist and the "screen surrogate". The protagonist's bodies are not the spectacle; instead, their facial expressions and thus their inner lives are in focus. The protagonists in *Illusions* and *The Kitchen Table Series* threaten the racialized symbol order in cinema by looking back, de-centering the maleness and whiteness in cinema.

In the last subchapter, I examined Weems's influence of the blues in *The Kitchen Table Series*. The first blues records were made by Black women and presented subversive, feminist content. In the early twentieth century, Black female blues singers constructed a new Black female consciousness and touched upon topics such as love, relationships and misogynist violence. The women singing the blues were defying white patriarchal structures by questioning

the heterosexual order of things. *The Kitchen Table Series,* I argued, is thematically and formally constructed like a blues song: Thematically, it does not romanticize love and instead portrays realistic relationships, like in the blues. The blues singers also sing about misogynist violence in their songs, which the *Kitchen Table Series* likewise does. Formally, the women of the blues use humor and satire, for example in regard to misogynist violence. In the texts of *The Kitchen Table Series*, Weems also uses humor to talk about the topic of misogynist violence. Another technique is the call-and-response technique, addressing a female audience directly for them to participate, which in the 1960s was an incorporated as "consciousness-raising groups" of the women's movement. Gertrude "Ma" Rainey and Bessie Smith address the audience directly, as does the narrator of the texts in *The Kitchen Table Series*. Ultimately, this creates participation and helps developing a Black feminist consciousness.

Overall, the selected works of Carrie Mae Weems shine a light on the long history of Black women's oppression in society. Utilizing photography, Weems addresses the racist and sexist uses of the medium, while also using its documentary notion in order to portray an authentic Black woman, one who does not fit into any category. Like the Black Arts Movement and the feminist art movement, she employs a Black or feminist aesthetic, combining aesthetics with political activism. The photographs of Carrie Mae Weems are addressing topics that were current in the 1990s and are current today. Her work not only critiques the status quo, but also offers a positive outlook: Black women can reclaim their bodies through Black feminist thought and create images and films, in which they do not have look "through the eyes of the others" in a Du Boisian sense or create an "oppositional gaze" as hooks suggested.

Alice Walker's short story "Coming Apart" also ends on a hopeful note: Through Black feminist thought, the protagonist is able to reclaim Black womanhood as well as convince her partner to educate himself on Black women's oppression and question the white, patriarchal system: "Long before she returns he is reading her books and thinking of her – and of her struggles alone in this fear of sharing them – and when she returns, it is sixty percent her body that he moves against the sun, her own black skin affirmed in the brightness of his eyes" (Walker 1981: 53).

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Illusions. Directed by Julie Dash. Performance by Lonette McKee, Rosanne Katon, Ned Bellamy. Black Filmmaker Foundation, Women Male Movies, and Third World Newsreel. Film, 1982.

Figure 1-5: Weems, Carrie Mae. *Not Manet's Type*, 1997. Via http://carriemaeweems.net/galleries/not-manet.html

Figure 1: *Not Manet's Type*, Image 1, 1997.

Figure 2: *Not Manet's Type*, Image 2, 1997.

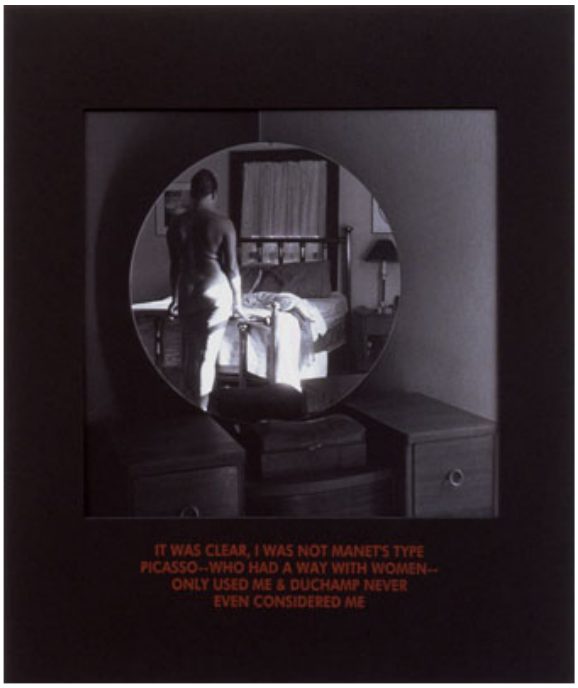


Figure 3: *Not Manet's Type*, Image 3, 1997.

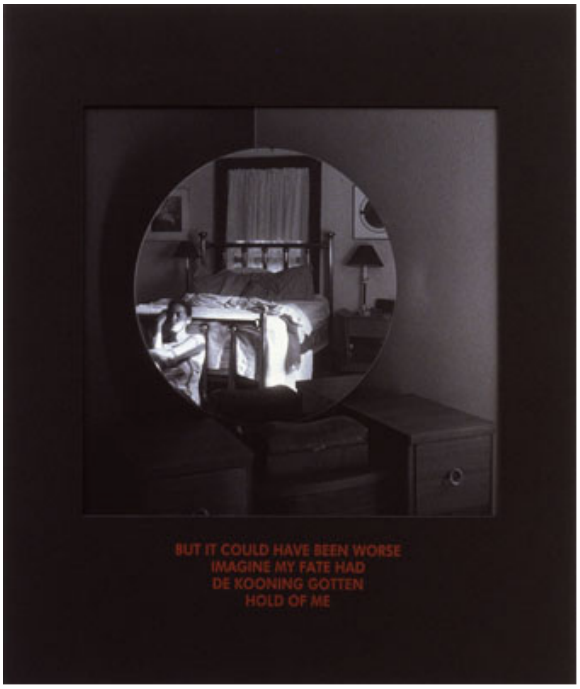


Figure 4: *Not Manet's Type*, Image 4, 1997.

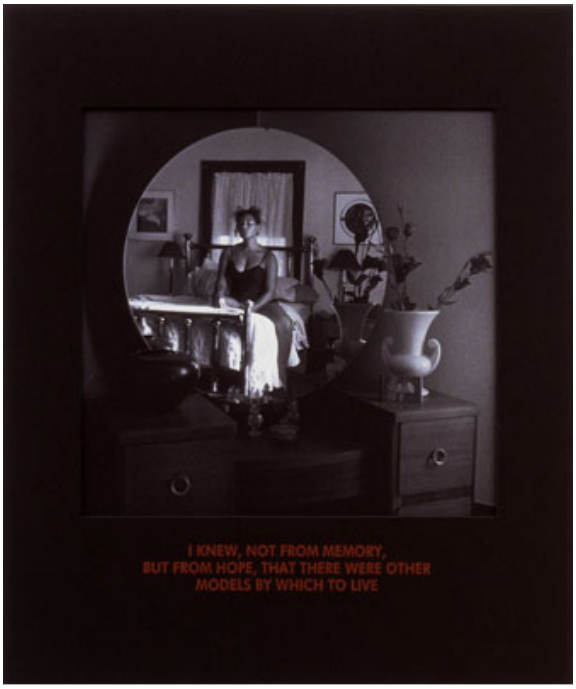


Figure 5: *Not Manet's Type*, Image 5, 1997.

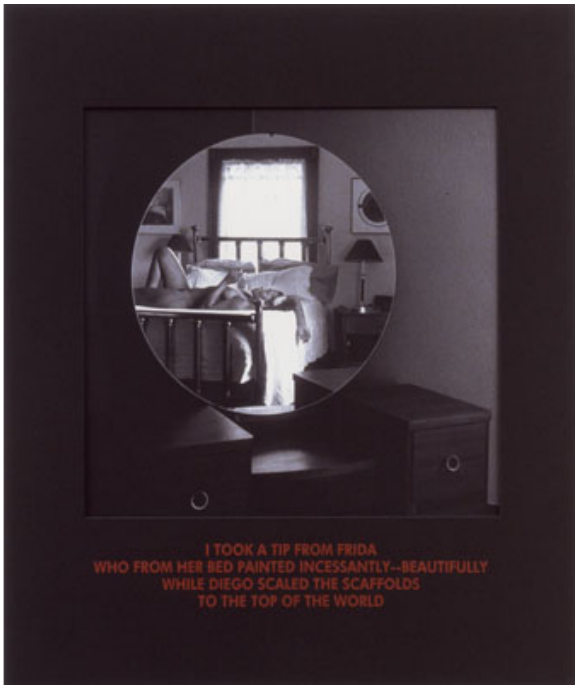


Figure 6: Manet, Édouard. Olympia, 1863. Oil on canvas, 130.5 x 190 cm, Musée d'Orsay, Paris. Via Wikipedia commons.

https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=19984782

Figure 7: Picasso, Pablo. *A Parody of Manets Olympia with Junyer and Picasso,* 1902. Chalk and ink on paper, 15.3 x 22.4 cm, Private Collection. Via Wikiart (Public Domain US)

https://www.wikiart.org/en/pablo-picasso/a-parody-of-manet-s-olympia-with-junyer-and-picasso

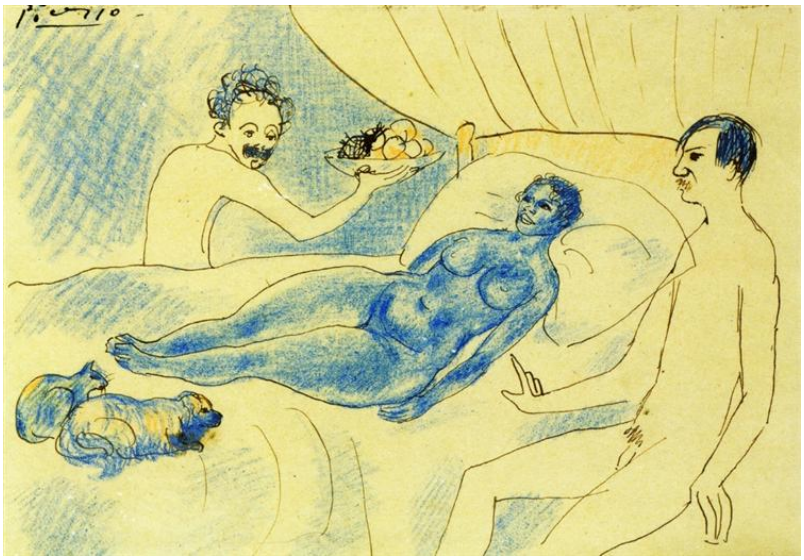


Figure 8: Pindell, Howardena. *Free, White, and 21* (video still), 1980. Video, 12 min. Courtesy of the artist and The Kitchen, New York. Reproduction from McMillan Uri, Embodied avatars: genealogies of black feminist art and performance, 2015, p.169.

Figure 9: Ringgold, Faith. *Dancing at the Louvre. The French Collection,* Part I: #1, 1991. Acrylic on canvas and tie-dyed fabric, 73 ½ x 80 ½ in. Collection of Ms. Francie Bishop Good and Mr. David Horvitz, Ft. Lauderdale. Photo: Gamma One. Reproduction from: Ringgold et al 1998, p.92.

Figure 10: Ringgold, Faith. *The Picnic at Giverny. The French Collection,* Part I: #3, 1991. Acrylic on canvas and tie-dyed fabric, 73 ½ x 90 ½ in. Collection of Mrs. Barbara and Mr. Eric Dobkin, Pound Ridge. Photo: Gamma One. Reproduction from: Ringgold et al 1998, p.96.

Figure 11-31: Weems, Carrie Mae. *The Kitchen Table Series*, 1990. Platinum prints, silk screened text panels, 27 1/4 inches x 27 1/4 inches.
Via
http://carriemaeweems.net/galleries/kitchen-table.html

Figure 11: *The Kitchen Table Series,* Image 1, 1990.

Figure 12: *The Kitchen Table Series,* Image 2, 1990.

Figure 13: *The Kitchen Table Series,* Image 3, 1990.

Figure 14: *The Kitchen Table Series,* Image 4, 1990.

Figure 15: *The Kitchen Table Series,* Image 5, 1990.

Figure 16: *The Kitchen Table Series,* Image 6, 1990.

Figure 17: *The Kitchen Table Series,* Image 7, 1990.

Figure 18: *The Kitchen Table Series,* Image 8, 1990.

Figure 19: *The Kitchen Table Series,* Image 9, 1990.

Figure 20: *The Kitchen Table Series,* Image 10, 1990.

Figure 21: *The Kitchen Table Series,* Image 11, 1990.

Figure 22: *The Kitchen Table Series,* Image 12, 1990.

Figure 23: *The Kitchen Table Series,* Image 13, 1990.

Figure 24: *The Kitchen Table Series,* Image 14, 1990.

Figure 25: *The Kitchen Table Series,* Image 15, 1990.

Figure 26: *The Kitchen Table Series,* Image 16, 1990.

Figure 27: *The Kitchen Table Series,* Image 17, 1990.

Figure 28: *The Kitchen Table Series,* Image 18, 1990.

Figure 29: *The Kitchen Table Series,* Image 19, 1990.

Figure 30: *The Kitchen Table Series,* Image 20, 1990.

Figure 31: Louis Agassiz, *Daguerreotype, Delia, Frontal*. Courtesy of the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University. Reproduction from Wallace and Smith (ed.) *Pictures and Progress*, 2012, p. 216.

Figure 32: Louis Agassiz, *Daguerreotype, Delia, Profile*. Courtesy of the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University. Reproduction from Wallace and Smith (ed.) *Pictures and Progress*, 2012, p. 216.

Figure 33: R. G. Montgomery, "Slave and Child," 1848. Sixth- plate daguerreotype. Jackie Napoleon Wilson Collection. Photograph courtesy of the J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles. Reproduction from Liss, *Feminist art and the maternal*, 2009, p.95.

Figure 1. R. G. Montgomery
American, active 1840s Richmond, Virginia
Slave and Child, 1848
Sixth-plate daguerreotype. Jackie Napolean Wilson Collection

Figure 34: *Sojourner B. Truth*, 1864 carte de visite with caption. Courtesy of the Library of Congress. Reproduction from Wallace and Smith (ed.) *Pictures and Progress*, 2012, p. 88.

Figure 35: Esther Jeeter (Rosanne Katon), singing. Screenshot from *Illusions* (1982) by Julie Dash, 16’30. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a_O_ONYINLY

Figure 36: Mignon Dupree (Lonette McKee) arguing with Lieutenant Bedsford (Ned Bellamy). Screenshot from *Illusions* (1982) by Julie Dash, 32’24. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a_O_ONYINLY

Figure 37: Text Panel 1 from *The Kitchen Table Series*. Reproduction from The Detroit Institute of Arts. Web. https://www.dia.org/art/collection/object/kitchen-table-series-107105

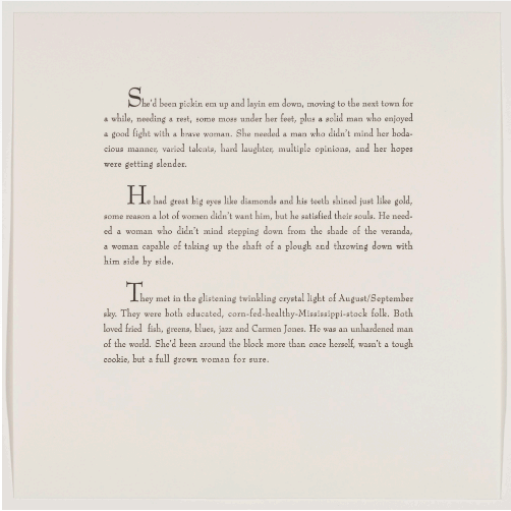


Figure 38: Text Panel 2 from *The Kitchen Table Series*.

Figure 39: Text Panel 3 from *The Kitchen Table Series*.

Figure 40: Text Panel 4 from *The Kitchen Table Series*.

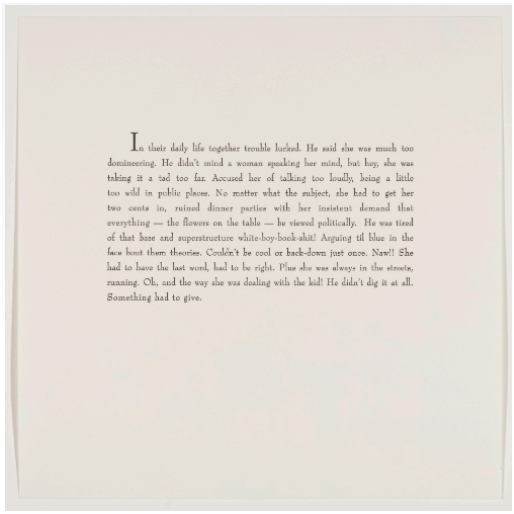


Figure 41: Text Panel 5 from *The Kitchen Table Series*.

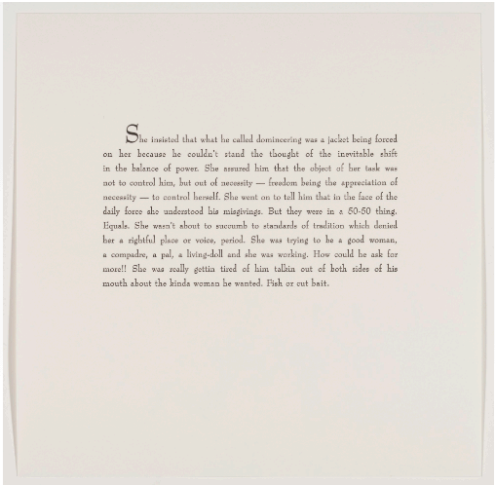


Figure 42: Text Panel 6 from *The Kitchen Table Series*.

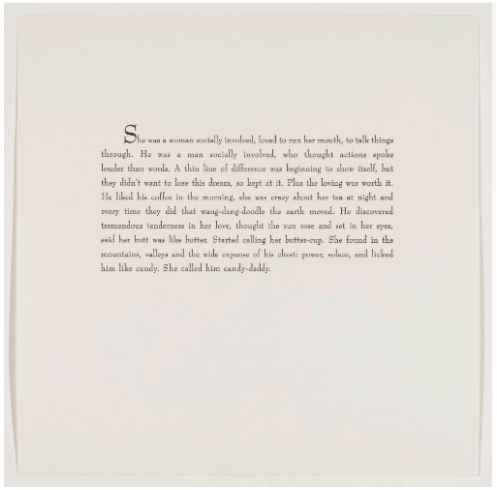


Figure 43: Text Panel 7 from *The Kitchen Table Series*.

Figure 44: Text Panel 8 from *The Kitchen Table Series*.

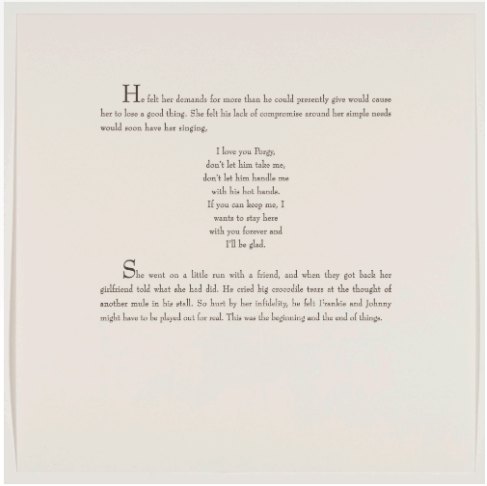


Figure 45: Text Panel 9 from *The Kitchen Table Series*.

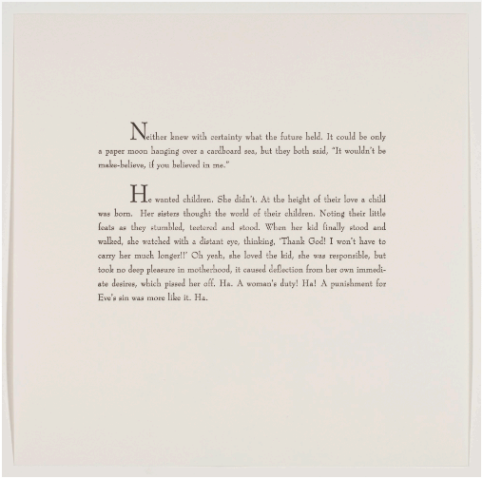


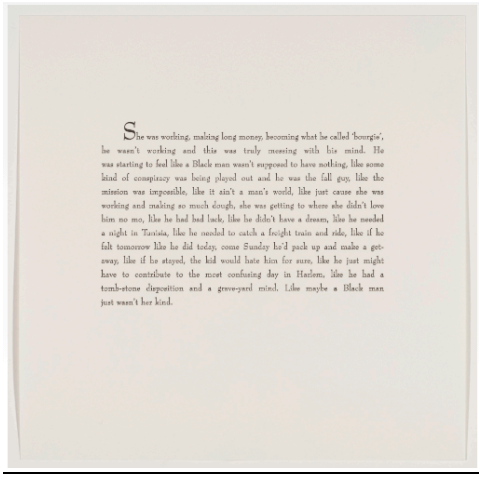
Figure 46: Text Panel 10 from *The Kitchen Table Series*.

Figure 47: Text Panel 11 from *The Kitchen Table Series*.

John and Mary sitting in a tree
k-i-s-s-i-n-g.
First comes love, then comes marriage;
then comes Mary with a baby carriage.

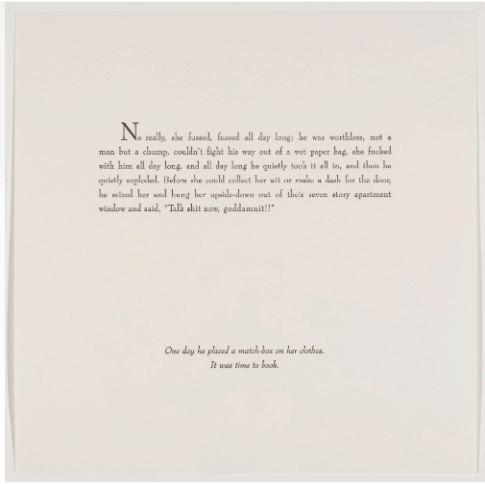
The kid had seen her parents loving and fighting, and had started playing house herself. She felt like H O T spelled more than hot, like she was little Sally Walker, and not Mary with bloating sheep, like she wanted to rise and wipe her weeping eyes, like she had been goody and deserved more than a rubber dolly, like Mother May I was too real to be called a game, like step on a crack and break your momma's back could be a plan, like red light, green light was the song to the key of life, like spinning the bottle could cause her to holler, like putting your foot on the right and letting the boys see you cock would have to wait, like hide and seek might be the best bet, like boys were rotten just like cotton described every boy she knew, like girls were dandy like candy described her to a tee, like dick, jane and their parents needed to take a hike, like over the rainbow was where it was at, even though she didn't like flying, like being the best at jacks didn't mean booty-squat. She felt like this mommy/daddy stuff was a remake of jack and jill.

Figure 48: Text Panel 12 from *The Kitchen Table Series*.



She was working, making long money, becoming what he called 'bourgie', he wasn't working and this was truly messing with his mind. He was starting to feel like a Black man wasn't supposed to have nothing, like some kind of conspiracy was being played out and he was the fall guy, like the mission was impossible, like it ain't a man's world, like just cause she was working and making so much dough, she was getting to where she didn't love him no mo, like he had bad luck, like he didn't have a dream, like he needed a night in Tunisia, like he needed to catch a freight train and ride, like if he felt tomorrow like he did today, come Sunday he'd pack up and make a get-away, like if he stayed, the kid would hate him for sure, like he just might have to contribute to the most confusing day in Harlem, like he had a tomb-stone disposition and a grave-yard mind. Like maybe a Black man just wasn't her kind.

Figure 49: Text Panel 13 from *The Kitchen Table Series*.



No really, she fussed, fussed all day long; he was worthless, not a man but a chump, couldn't fight his way out of a wet paper bag, she fucked with him all day long, and all day long he quietly took it all in, and then he quietly exploded. Before she could collect her wit or make a dash for the door, he seized her and hung her upside-down out of their seven story apartment window and said, "Talk shit now, goddamnit!!"

One day he placed a match-box on her clothes.
It was time to book.

Figure 50: Text Panel 14 from *The Kitchen Table Series*.

In and of itself, being alone again naturally wasn't a problem. But some time had passed. At 38 she was beginning to feel the fullness of her woman self, wanted once again to share it all with a man who could deal with the multitude of her being. But that would have to come later. Presently she was in her solitude, so it wasn't nobody's business what she did.

Sit there and count your fingers.
What can you do?
Oh, girl you're through.
It's time you knew
all you can ever count on
are the rain drops that fall on
little girl blue.

Step on a pin, the pin bends and that's the way the story ends.

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