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## Womanism and Black Feminism in the Work of Carrie Mae Weems

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### ABSTRACT

This article examines the liberatory aspects of Womanism and Black Feminism in the work of artist Carrie Mae Weems. Weems, artist and anthropologist, creates artwork that highlights the issues of oppression and giving voice to worldwide issues. Under the theoretical lens of Womanism, the article utilizes Arts-Based-Educational Research (ABER), a non-traditional methodology, which aligns with Womanism to provide insight into past and present issues of liberation and equity. Womanism, Black women's feminism, and ABER have the potential to bring issues of equity and social justice out of the academies and into the everyday world for those most in need of liberation.

Keywords: Social justice, womanism, liberation.

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### 1.0 Introduction

From the arrival of the first Africans in America, Black women have used Womanism and Black feminism to navigate the often unbearable road toward freedom. During and after slavery, Black women practiced African-inspired traditions such as collective action and spirituality. The early survival characteristics of Black women's activism and leadership have evolved into the overlapping concepts of Black feminism and Womanism. Consequently, Black women have used their seemingly marginalized

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positions in society to bring about change, utilizing methods unique to women of African descent. An example of a woman who used her seemingly marginal status to bring about social change is Callie House, the daughter of former slaves. According to Phillips (2006), “Examples of this womanist social change method can be found in washerwoman Callie House’s reparations movement activism during the late 1800’s” (p. xxix). House used her limited education to inform former enslaved African Americans of their rights to challenge the government for reparations in the form of money, land, and medical care in the years after slavery. Other Black women leaders such as Ida B. Wells, Ella Baker, and Septima Clark also practiced womanist activism and Black feminism. Wells risked her life to illuminate the evils of lynching, a socially and politically sanctioned form of terror practiced by White supremacists that left African Americans in a state of perpetual fear throughout the early 20th century. Baker and Clark, contemporaries during the modern Civil Rights Movement, provided training, education, and inspiration to thousands of African Americans by promoting collective action. Without their visionary leadership, Dr. Martin Luther King may very well have been marching alone.

**Figure 1:** Plate 9 in *Ritual & Revolution*, by Carrie Mae Weems, 2003. From *Constructing History: A Requiem to Mark the Moment* [Art catalogue], by L. A. Farrell & C. M. Weems (with D. Willis), 2009, Savannah, GA: Savannah College of Art and Design. Image courtesy of Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.



During the 21st century, African American women educators have continued the practices of Womanism and Black feminism in the pursuit of the creation of a democratic society. Building upon the legacy of House, Wells, Baker, and Clark, African American women during the 1980s and 1990s used personal and collective voices in order to illuminate issues of social justice through literature, the visual arts, and education. According to Giddings (2008), “In that period, the voice for black women, the living narrative of our experience, not only emerged but began to define the literature, arts, and scholarship that were informed by it” (p. 5). However, critical dialogue concerning African American art has been difficult to find, in light of the constricted world of art history and art criticism. Consequently, even when art critics address the work of African American artists, their reflections are uncritical and shallow. Other critical reflections about African American art reflect the views of a select few African American academics whose body of work only reaches others within the academy. Bell hooks (1995) addressed African American art from a critical standpoint. In describing her motivation for becoming a self-described cultural critic, hooks stated,

As a cultural critic, I began writing about art because I saw an absence of progressive art criticism in both traditional and popular settings. When I first began to read and study critical work about African-American art, I was truly appalled by the lack of complex thinking (p. 106).

Carrie Mae Weems’s resistance to the staid practices of art and art criticism that have defined the art

world even in the face of growing changes demonstrates her dedication to the ideals of social justice. Her use of images and text to address the injustices found in society mirrors the practices of African American women's transformative leadership, particularly in the field of education. According to Willis, in *Constructing History: A Requiem to Mark the Moment*, Weems used words and images to contextualize "the political stories of the 'isms' that have defined free speech, beauty, identity, oppression and love over the last 40 years: racism, feminism, sexism, anarchism, optimism, pessimism, collectivism, egoism, humanitarianism, intellectualism, liberalism, modernism and postmodernism" (Farrell & Weems, 2009, n.p.).

### 1.01 Womanism

Womanism is an ethnically and culturally based perspective that seeks to reconcile differences amongst various peoples. According to Phillips (2006), "A womanist is triply concerned with herself, other Black women, and the entire Black race, female and male—but also all humanity, showing an ever-expanding and ultimately universal arc of political concern, empathy and activism" (p. xxiii). Womanism is an African-derived concept that incorporates dialogue, harmonizing and coordinating differences. It encompasses the African-derived concept of motherhood, which is distinctively different from the dehumanizing, patronizing concept of motherhood applied to African American women in the United States. According to Phillips (2006),

In the African context, motherhood is a set of highly elaborated constructs encompassing a number of meanings and not generally recognized in the Euroamerican context. Essentially motherhood is a set of behaviors based on caretaking, management, nurturance, education, spiritual meditation, and dispute resolution (p. xxix).

The intuitive nature of Womanism makes it a subversive concept, resistant to academic appropriation and ideological consumption. In other words, Womanism does not fit within the framework of scientific objectivity found within the academy. There is no pure methodology; it relies on a "mixed method" approach.

The Womanist concepts of arbitration and mediation are also reflective of African-derived concepts that are in direct conflict with the Euroamerican concept of "us and them." There are no enemies, but instead parties who disagree with one another. The African concept of Ogunyemi, the arbitration of differences, relies on the concepts of voice and "looking." According to Phillips (2006), "Ogunyemi refers to womanist arbitration and mediation as 'siddon look' tactics, literally 'sit down and look' or sit down and cogitate" (p. xxvii). This is further characterized as using the concept of "looking" to create enlightenment and dissolve difference. As Phillips stated, "Womanism is a social-change perspective that focuses on harmonizing and coordinating difference, ending all forms of oppression and dehumanization, and promoting well-being and commonweal for all people, regardless of identity, social address, or origins" (pp. xxxv-xxxvi).

### 1.02 Black women's feminism

Collins (2000) offered insight into the concept of Black feminist thought from a historical, sociological position. Collins stated that "how Black women construct social realities is a recurring theme in black feminist thought" (p. 92). The construction of social realities and knowledge has been inspired by the concept of "watching." According to Collins, "In order to survive, those of us for whom oppression is as American as apple pie have always had to be watchers" (p. 97). "Watching" is based on the multiple consciousnesses found in African American women based on the intersections of race, class, and gender. In order to succeed in an oppressive society, African American women have been forced to learn the values, manners, and language of the oppressors. Long before the use of terminology such as Womanism and feminism, Black women used their positions as mother, teacher, sister, wife, friend, and so forth to educate other African Americans in order to survive and thrive in an oppressive state. The creation of such informal networks sustained the African American communities in the pre-civil-rights

apartheid era of the United States and will likely continue to sustain the Diaspora of African American communities in the future.

A crucial aspect of both Black feminism and Womanism has been the use of personal narratives to gain self-awareness and create dialogue with other peoples and communities. Hooks (1984, 1995), whose work incorporated the concepts of Black women's feminism and Womanism, focused her attention on the use of "voice" for members of traditionally marginalized groups. Hooks explained that the use of voice is more than just recounting personal experiences. As she stated, "Coming to voice is not just the act of telling one's own experience. It is using that strategically—to come to voice so that you can also speak freely about other subjects" (Hooks, 1994, p. 148). The use of voice has been crucial in gaining a sense of self, which is a major aspect of the practice of collective action.

## 2.0 Methodology: Arts-based educational research

This article uses Arts-Based Educational Research (ABER) to highlight the practices of Womanism and Black feminism in the art of Carrie Mae Weems. Weems, whose prolific body of work has consistently highlighted themes of resistance, collective action, self-definition, and concern for the human condition, has used her artwork to address how widely held assumptions and beliefs have created social injustices that perpetuate oppression and marginalization. According to McNiff (2008),

Arts-based research can be defined as the systematic use of the artistic process, the actual making of artistic expressions in all of the different forms of the arts, as a primary way of understanding and examining experience by both researchers and the people that they involve in their studies. (p. 29)

ABER is defined by artistic or "design" elements that infuse the research "text." The "text" may include plastic and performing arts or theater arts, all of which are used to "speak" to the audience and influence perceptions. The combination of design and text invites both the audience and artist to revisit beliefs and assumptions that are often held as truth. As Barone and Eisner (2012) stated, the purpose of arts-based research is "the promotion of (at the least, momentary) disequilibrium—uncertainty—in the way that both the author/researcher and the audience(s) of the work regard important social and cultural phenomena" (p. 16).

While various forms of research offer insight into social phenomena, ABER achieves this end through the use of aesthetic forms. According to Barone and Eisner (2012), "Only the compositions of artists and arts based researchers can redirect conversations about social phenomena by enabling others to vicariously reexperience the world" (p. 20). Effective use of artistic elements of design is achieved by careful investigation into dimensions of the social world, a reconfiguration and re-presentation of selected facets of what the research uncovers, and the production of disequilibrium within the percipient of the work as he or she experiences what has been designed. Within the context of these dimensions, Weems's carefully chosen fabrics, textures, and mediums create an aesthetic quality that enhances the viewers' perceptions of the chosen subject or event.

ABER is an important methodology for researching the human experience because it offers multiple possibilities of "knowing" that are artistic in character. According to Barone and Eisner (1997), "ABER is not aimed toward a quest for certainty. Its purpose may instead be described as the *enhancement of perspectives*" (p. 96). The language of ABER has been "characterized as (a) evocative, (b) contextual, and (c) vernacular" (Barone and Eisner 1997, p. 97). The use of evocative language is largely based on the use of metaphor, which allows the artist to use a particular event or image as a metaphor for other issues.

## 3.0 Literature review

The images that have been historically used to oppress and subjugate Black women have been a



hallmark of American art and Western images. These images, which have been indelibly imprinted in the minds of Americans—Black, White, and those arrayed in between—have contributed to the vast stereotypes about Black women. As Collins (2000) stated, “Controlling images applied to black women that originated during the slave era attest to the ideological dimension of U.S. Black women’s oppression” (p. 5).

Carrie Mae Weems, artist, folklorist, and anthropologist, has used personal, cultural, national, and world histories to illustrate concepts of social justice. She has used art to highlight the plight of members of marginalized groups throughout the world. Through the use of documentary series, still lifes, narrative tableaux, and installation works, Weems has confronted the tangled mass of social issues that many artists are afraid to address. Patterson (2000) stated that Weems’s purpose is to “use that knowledge to provide for a future in which we willingly acknowledge, preserve, and celebrate diversity” (p. 30). Weems’s desire to use her work to inspire social transformation is also grounded in Womanism and Black women’s feminism, each of which has focused on risk taking, eliminating oppression, collective action, and giving voice to marginalized groups. Moreover, Weems’s work has often relied upon the sociohistorical perspective that highlights the chronology of African American women’s social activism. Weems’s photographic installation, *From Here I Saw What Happened . . . And I Cried* (1995-1996), offers a visual example of resistance to racism, sexism, and social oppression. Starting with a regal image of an African woman (see Figure 2), the installation proceeds to highlight the downward spiral of dehumanization brought about by the transatlantic slave trade.

**Figure 2:** Image 1 in *From Here I Saw What Happened . . . And I Cried*, by Carrie Mae Weems, 1995-1996. From *Constructing History: A Requiem to Mark the Moment* [Art catalogue], by L. A. Farrell & C. M. Weems (with D. Willis), 2009, Savannah, GA: Savannah College of Art and Design. Image courtesy of the Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.



### 3.01 From here i saw what happened . . . and i cried

Carrie Mae Weems’s work illustrates the foundational aspects of Womanism by openly resisting the various manifestations of White male hegemony. A strong example of the controlling images applied to Black women is Weems’s series, *From Here I Saw What Happened . . . And I Cried* (1995). The series is a 32-piece photographic installation based on 19th-century slave daguerreotypes at the J. Paul Getty Museum. The slave daguerreotypes, produced in 1850 by American “artist” Joseph T. Zealy, were an attempt to scientifically objectify the lives of the enslaved Africans. Weems appropriated the original images from the Getty, toning most of them in a blood-red glow. She then inscribed texts across the glass, calling attention to the dehumanizing scientific racism that characterized the original works (Patterson, 2000).

Weems used a “silent witness” to highlight the sociohistorical perspective of the denigration of the African American image. The silent witness acts as part of and separate from the historical events she

narrates. The opening image of a regal African queen is beautiful, sensual, and proud. She bears witness to the ills awaiting Africans in the aftermath of the transatlantic slave trade. Using the second-person singular pronoun “you,” Weems’s muse highlights the stolen identities of the African Americans while at the same time reminding the audience that the African Americans portrayed as “types” were actually living beings. Seven of the enslaved African Americans portrayed in the original daguerreotypes—Alfred, Jem, Fassena, Jack, Drana, Renty, and Delia—were either kidnapped from West African countries or born into slavery in the American South. In *House, Field, Yard and Cook* (Figure 3), from the series *From Here I Saw What Happened . . . And I Cried*, Weems showed specific examples of stereotypes that have obliterated the human face of Africans in the United States, replacing them with ubiquitous stereotypes.

**Figure 3:** *House, Field, Yard, Kitchen* in *From Here I Saw What Happened . . . And I Cried*, by Carrie Mae Weems, 1995-1996. From *Constructing History: A Requiem to Mark the Moment* [Art catalogue], by L. A. Farrell & C. M. Weems (with D. Willis), 2009, Savannah, GA: Savannah College of Art and Design. Image courtesy of the Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.



As Africans were absorbed (or not) into American society, they became “othered,” leading to pervasive images such as mammy, cook, and sapphire. The perpetuation of these stereotypes has led to the pervasive beliefs that African Americans had no individual identities and that before the arrival of enslaved Africans in the United States, Africans had no history. Weems’s subtle yet dramatic changes to the daguerreotypes illuminate the hidden lives of the slaves. The forcefulness of their gaze is a direct act of resistance to the intended effects of objectification and denigration. Figure 4, taken from *The Hampton Project*, features a panel of General Samuel Chapman Armstrong with his family, flanked on either side by two panels of Native American students at the Hampton Institute, the first panel featuring students upon their arrival at Hampton in 1878 and the second image showing them 2 years later in 1880. In the center of the image of Armstrong, Weems has overlaid the words, “With your missionary might/ you extended the hand of grace/ reaching down & snatching me/ up and out of myself” (Patterson, 2000, p. 33).

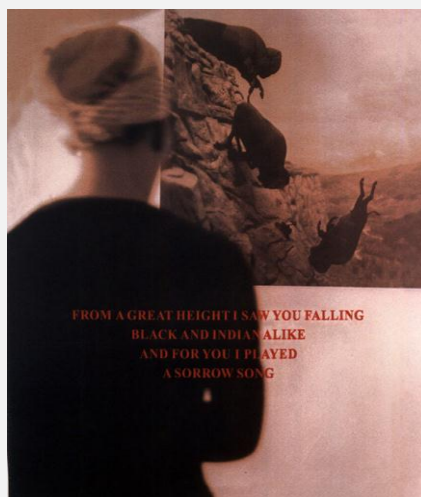
**Figure 4:** Image 1 in *The Hampton Project*, by Carrie Mae Weems, 2000. From *Constructing History: A Requiem to Mark the Moment* [Art catalogue], by L. A. Farrell & C. M. Weems (with D. Willis), 2009, Savannah, GA: Savannah College of Art and Design. Image courtesy of the Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.



### 3.02 The Hampton project

*The Hampton Project* (2000), commissioned in 1998 by Williams College, features images by Frances Benjamin Johnston, a photographer commissioned in 1899 to document the Hampton Institute for the Contemporary American Negro Life exhibition at the Universal Exposition in Paris in 1900. Weems's installation featured muslin enlargements of 26 of Johnston's original photographs, as well as more contemporary images, combining them with graphics, text, and audio recordings. Weems, again appropriating historical images to address the objectification and dehumanization of African Americans and members of other marginalized groups, used her "muse," or silent witness, to narrate the sociohistorical fate of the children of former slaves and Native Americans. The original intention of Johnston's pictures was to illustrate the progress Hampton Institute had made in assisting the children of slaves and dispossessed Indians to become proud and useful citizens. Weems's appropriation of the images is a direct indictment of the institute's original intention of assimilating African American and Native American students into the dominant society. Consequently, she highlights the symbolic deaths of African American and Native American cultures. Figure 5, taken from *The Hampton Project*, features an image of Weems, her back turned to the camera, with her head bowed, while facing an image of buffalo falling over the side of a cliff. The caption reads, "From a great height I saw you falling/Black and Indian alike/ and for you I played/ a sorrow song" (Patterson, 2000, p. 35).

**Figure 5:** (Image 2) in *The Hampton Project*, by Carrie Mae Weems, 1998. From *Constructing History: A Requiem to Mark the Moment* [Art catalogue], by L. A. Farrell & C. M. Weems (with D. Willis), 2009, Savannah, GA: Savannah College of Art and Design. Image courtesy of the Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.



In the midst of recent upheavals in the educational system, *The Hampton Project* (2000) offers strong

commentary on the often misguided attempts of proponents of education to assimilate members of marginalized groups into the dominant culture. The image of the school's founder, General Samuel Chapman Armstrong, and his family is flanked by two images of Native American students on either side (see Figure 4). The first image of the Native American students upon their arrival at Hampton shows them in full tribal dress, highlighting their long black hair, which hangs loosely or in braids. The second image, taken after the students had been "acculturated" into mainstream society, shows the same students in suits, with short haircuts. The images highlight the original aim of Hampton Institute, to strip Native American and African American students of their respective cultures and remake them into acceptable members of American society. Weems challenges the original aims of Hampton Institute, examining the issues of assimilation as well as patterns of education, social mores, and etiquette.

Patterson (2000) stated that "Weems sees much of the American educational system as infected with decontextualized, disembodied, and irrelevant exercises that teach students to fake understanding and to seek a norm of approval rather than knowledge, comprehension, and creativity" (p. 30). This reinforces the womanist and Black feminist concept of feigning complacency in order to survive in the dominant society. Just as African American women walk in two worlds, the White male-dominated world and the often subjugated world of African American women, Weems walks in two worlds with her appropriation of established aesthetic forms of art to deliver aggressive and contentious messages. As Patterson (2000) stated, "She often uses pieces that seem to fit comfortably within the status quo, but that in the end prove to be irritants and catalysts challenging viewers to confront their own beliefs, prejudices and values" (p. 22). Through using the personal and political as a starting point for understanding the human condition, Weems's work creates universal narratives that address a variety of national and international issues.

*The Hampton Project* (2000), one of a trilogy of Weems's proclaimed "fabric suites," brings together the work of two women "artists" removed by time and race. Weems used Johnston's original mid-19th-century photographs to create a contemporary dialogue on race and education. The Hampton Institute, a historically Black college, was created as a national showcase for the education of African Americans and later Native Americans. The focus of the school was to offer a vocational education combining academic coursework, manual training, and Christian education with the end goal of producing graduates that could return to their respective communities to educate others.

The goal is clearly illustrated in Weems's manipulations of the original photographs through the text she superimposed across the image of Armstrong and his family. The inscription reads, "With your missionary might/ you extended the hand of grace/ reaching down & snatching me/ up and out of myself" (Patterson 2000, p. 33). The indictment of Chapman highlights his patronizing and racist assumptions, while giving voice to the Native American students. The term *missionary might* acknowledges the motivation behind Chapman's desires to help newly freed slaves and their Native American counterparts. Chapman likely believed that it was his missionary duty to bring Christianity to African Americans and Native Americans, while simultaneously removing any traces of indigenous religious or spiritual beliefs. However, also suggested in the term *missionary might* was the practice of coercion that Chapman was also willing to use in order to foster his belief in assimilating his students. Extending "the hand of grace" also suggests that through General Chapman, God was extending his grace toward people who would otherwise not be able to decide their life goals for themselves. Finally, the phrase "snatching me up and out of myself" represents the lack of voice members of marginalized groups have traditionally faced in the United States.

Weems's indictment of Armstrong's belief in the use of education to assimilate Blacks and Native Americans highlights today's obsession with creating national educational standards. According to Patterson (2000), "Current scholarship generally considers the photographs promotional, propagandist affidavits of the progress African Americans and Native Americans could make under the 'Hampton method'" (p. 29). Patterson continued, stating that some analyses highlight "the imaging of African Americans and Native Americans as moral, educated, and regimented workers serving to assure whites



of the continuing hegemony of the American (read Anglo-Saxon) dream and value system” (p. 29). Figure 6, *Slave Coast* from *Ritual & Revolution* (1993) features three silver print photographs of the infamous West African slave trading port and text that reads, “Elimina Cape Coast, Ile De Goree.” The image of the seemingly benign doorway, the “Door of No Return,” and curved stone staircases undermines the true purpose of the trading post: the destruction of the body, mind, spirit, and culture throughout centuries of slavery.

**Figure 6:** *Slave Coast* in *Ritual & Revolution*, by Carrie Mae Weems, 1993. From *Constructing History: A Requiem to Mark the Moment* [Art catalogue], by L. A. Farrell & C. M. Weems (with D. Willis), 2009, Savannah, GA: Savannah College of Art and Design. Image courtesy of the Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.



### 3.03 Ritual & revolution

Weems’s fabric installation, *Ritual & Revolution* (1998), is a series of print images and layered banners that form a narrative pathway. The installation takes the form of a journey that embraces the histories of peoples in first- and third-world cultures. The first and final images of the narrative installation are set, while the middle section shifts from one installation site to another. In a similar fashion as *From Here I Saw What Happened . . . And I Cried* and *The Hampton Project*, Weems used the silent witness or “persona” in *Ritual & Revolution*. Posing as a dark-skinned goddess, Weems represented “Black Athena,” decentering the traditional, linear narrative of Western culture. The visage of the goddess Black Athena represents resistance to the dominance of Western thought and subjugation of third-world peoples throughout the centuries.

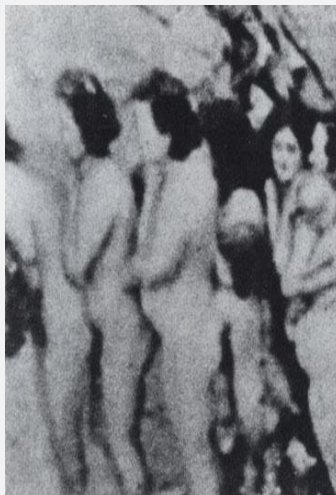
As the persona of Black Athena, Weems takes the viewer on a historical voyage, but her retelling of history is decidedly non-Eurocentric. According to McInnes (1999), “Weems’s guide as a kind of ‘Black Athena’ is a subversive gesture” (p. 13). Weems inserts well-placed quotations throughout her work in order to revise the dominant narrative. Highlighting the issues of loss and mourning in these narratives, Weems attempts to recover the past. In an interview with Bell Hooks (1996), Weems explained why traditional photographic or documentary methods fail to capture the hidden narratives she brings forth in her work. As Weems stated,

When I started to understand it, when I learned that the terrain that I wanted to walk on couldn’t be carried forth by straight documentary, my attention shifted. There was something different that I wanted to explore, work that had the appearance of documentary, but was not at all documentary. It was highly fabricated work. (Hooks, 1996, pp. 80–81)

Using the seemingly benign image of a cobblestone walkway leading to an arched doorway, the artist

highlights a Portuguese trading post in the West African country of Ghana. Behind the high walls lie centuries of exploitation and enslavement, similar to the Senegalese “door of no return.” Other images of conquered civilizations include a Mayan city that was occupied at the time of the Spanish conquest of Mexico, and a group of Hopi women from the western United States with their backs turned toward the cameras. Weems also used more recent examples of oppression and genocide in *Ritual & Revolution*, showing images from the Holocaust, the Civil Rights Movement, and the Cambodian genocide. By placing the images within the larger context of suffering, Weems drew a link between the oppression of Jews, Cambodians, and African Americans through the repetition of the refrain, “I was with you.” Weems “elegizes the long history of domination and oppression in what has been characterized by W. E. B. DuBois as ‘sorrow songs’” (McInnes 1999, p. 18). Under the gaze of the witness “Black Athena,” Weems presented “sorrow songs” for people who have suffered throughout history, in different times, places, and for different reasons. As McInnes (1999) continued, “Her telling history counters the suppression of voice. At the end is redemption” (p. 18). Figure 7, taken from *Ritual & Revolution* (2003) features an image of terrified naked Holocaust victims. This is an image appropriated by Weems to highlight the sufferings of people throughout history, creating a link between the suffering women and the previous images of Native Americans and African Americans.

**Figure 7:** Plate 15 in *Ritual & Revolution*, by Carrie Mae Weems, 2003. From *Constructing History: A Requiem to Mark the Moment* [Art catalogue], by L. A. Farrell & C. M. Weems (with D. Willis), 2009, Savannah, GA: Savannah College of Art and Design. Image courtesy of the Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.



#### 4.0 Discussion

Consistent patterns found within ABER are the potential to resolve conflict, create critical dialogue, and fight oppression. The theoretical lenses of Womanism and Black feminism provide a strong framework because of the focus on ending systemic oppression. A consistent thread found in the theories of Womanism and Black feminism has been the use of voice. The oppressive nature of systemic racism ensured the mutation of African American women’s voices throughout American history. The discourse of the academies has contributed to this silencing through the objectification of history, art, and education. Thus, the use of voice is a central aspect in the promotion of critical dialogue as well as eliminating the various forms of oppression.

ABER promotes individual transformation through both the development of self-awareness and collaboration with others. As Dillard (2002) stated, “I am suggesting that our human diversity is our strength and that we have already been unified by two truths more powerful than our individual stories” (p. 385). The first of the two “truths” is that “we, as people of the earth, are unified through breath. Intimately and absolutely connected. The second truth is that each one of us is spirit. The embodied energy of life” (Dillard 2002, p. 385). The focus on interconnectedness is at the core of conflict resolution. Thus, the system of classification and taxonomy, which are part of the dominant

scientific method, operates in direct contradiction with arts-based education. Furthermore, the complementary relationship between Womanism and Black feminism also encourages conflict resolution between parties. According to Phillips (2006), “Taxonomic systems rely on ‘either/or’ logic, while familial organization systems rest on ‘both/and’ logic” (p. xxxii). As stated earlier, the African-derived concepts of family and motherhood negate the necessity for “winning” and “losing” practiced in Western societies.

The use of ABER has the ability to create critical dialogue because it does not rely on absolutes and instead focuses on learning. According to McNiff (2007), “Both art-based research and science involve the use of systemic experimentation with the goal of gaining knowledge about life” (p. 33). However, in contrast to the scientific method, ABER focuses on the enhancement of perspective rather than searching for absolutes. The theoretical lenses of Black women’s feminism and Womanism acknowledge the subjectivity of reality and illustrate that each person has many histories. According to Sheared (1994), “Giving voice has become an aim of those who seek to provide students and educators with an opportunity to become engaged in a critically reflective dialogue regardless of the subject matter” (p. 273). This concept is reflected in the work of Weems, whose use of the silent witness has given voice to the histories of oppressed peoples, irrespective of differences in circumstance or time.

*Ritual & Revolution* presents the histories of multiple peoples, using the Black Athena as the common link or “witness” throughout the historical events. Consequently, Weems provided the opportunity for both oppressor and oppressed to engage in critical dialogue. Weems’s manipulation of text and images in *The Hampton Project* highlights Hampton Institute’s original intention to make Black and Native American pupils useful citizens by replacing their respective “inferior” cultures. According to Patterson (2000), Weems stated, “It addresses the ways education can result in stamping out carbon copies, creating people with the same moral code, who find value in the same things” (p. 30). Weems’s exhibition used 18th-century photographs to link both past and current practices in education, illustrating the inherent biases and assumptions that have influenced the educational system and its consequent complicity in maintaining the status quo. As Sheared (1994) stated, “All knowledge is grounded in a social, political, economic, and historical context” (p. 273).

The use of a silent witness, a muse, or Black Athena illustrates the concept of “second sight.” Second sight is the position that has provided African American women with the ability to provide a separate narrative apart from the dominant narrative presented throughout Western history. Similarly, the Black Athena’s narrative of the histories of peoples linked across time and place has shown how the experiences are both unique and common. Acknowledging the common threads of oppression and the silencing of voices identified as “other” has given people on the margins an opportunity to make their stories heard.

Weems has fought the myriad forms of oppression through the use of the liberation theories, Womanism, and Black feminism. Her artwork has the potential to end pervasiveness of oppressive images of Black women that are indelibly imprinted in American minds. Through her unique perspective as an African American woman, she has recast and reframed historical events in order to highlight the oppression of other groups as well.

Weems’s goal is to create art that is beautiful, challenging, and culturally meaningful. She also stated, “I’m also committed to radical social change. . . . Any form of human injustice moves me deeply . . . the battle against all forms of oppression keeps me focused” (as cited in Patterson 2000, p. 22). Through her incorporation of words and phrases with seemingly mundane objects such as vinyl records, wallpaper, and natural fabrics, Weems transforms the everyday world into thought-provoking messages and universal concepts.

The use of vernacular in Womanism, Black women’s feminism, and ABER has the potential to bring issues of equity and social justice out of the academies and into the everyday world for those most in need of liberation. According to Dillard (2002), “There are indeed voices, texts, canons, and

conversations available internationally that we have not heard” (p. 387). The inclusion of these voices for both educators and students highlights “multiple truths,” the various lived realities and narratives that comprise each person. Ultimately, this is a necessary component of teaching in order to foster true democratic principles. As Dillard (2002) concluded, “To practice [teaching] one needs community. Only by belonging to a community can we say we ‘know’ and speak with competence” (p. 391).

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