

# Voyeuristic Sadism: Maintaining

## Anti-Blackness

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Carrie Mae Weems, born in 1953, is an influential Black American artist specialising in art forms such as photography, text, audio, and digital images. One of her most notable series, *From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried*, 1995-96, is an art installation of thirty-four “found” photographs and daguerreotypes, which she rephotographed and significantly altered to illuminate photography’s role in aiding and abetting racism throughout history. (Raymond, 2015) Many critiques of Weems’ installation express confusion about her as a black woman, not only viewing these horrific images, but also choosing to represent them publicly. (Raymond, 2015) These narratives inadvertently brand Weems and the role of the audience's choice to witness black trauma as voyeuristic sadists. Through the analysis of Weems’ *From Here I Saw What Happened, and I cried 1995-96*, this essay strives to deconstruct voyeuristic sadism within white supremacy, its role in the suppression of black pain, and how it has been used to bar the oppressed group from reclaiming agency from said trauma.

Claire Raymond in “The Crucible of Witnessing: Projects of Identity in Carrie Mae Weems’ *From Here I Saw What Happened, And I Cried*” defines sadism differently than Freud, specifying it “as a delight in witnessing cruelty, or a delight in creating humiliating images of other human beings.” (Raymond, 2015) Raymond’s addition of the phrase “witnessing” enhances the depth of the cruelty associated with sadism, as the act of viewing it affirms the existence of said debasement, despite the circumstances of how one comes in contact with the image. There,

the oppressed party is forever branded with the shame of experiencing marginalisation, with no other option but to force the world to forget it even existed. This is what I like to call Voyeuristic Sadism, a sustained entity that functions to prolong the longevity of white supremacy in our society through intentional erasure. Further exploration of Weems' *From Here I Saw What Happened, and I cried 1995-96*, identifies the inner workings of voyeuristic sadism within white supremacy in its exposé, but also through the critiques and conversations it sparks. *From Here I Saw What Happened, and I Cried, 1995-96* includes photographs collected from different university and museum archives, dating from 1850 to the 1950s and early 60s, marking the beginning of the Civil Rights Movement. (The Museum of Modern Art, NYC, 2021) Weems builds a timeline that maps the plight of black people in America, beginning just eighteen years shy of emancipation, to just before the Civil Rights Act, highlighting 100 years of extreme racial tensions, violent propaganda, and dehumanization. The installation begins and ends with a photo of the Royal figure Nobosodruo, a highborn Mangbetu woman who had originally been photographed by the explorer George Sphect. (The Museum of Modern Art, NYC, 2021) Though the picture had a history of misuse by Western colonialists, it has since been re-appropriated by creatives like Weems within Afro-futurism. (The Museum of Modern Art, NYC, 2021) Weems inscribes the first photo with "*From Here I Saw What Happened,*" and the second image, inverted, features the remainder of the series' title, "*and I cried.*"



Weems' inclusion of the Royal figure to begin and end her piece is imperative to the perceived victimisation of Black people. We live in a society that reserves empathy and respect for those in positions of power, whether that be monetary, governmental, or through "royal bloodlines," and Weems bestows upon these images an identity of power that has been stripped away by oppression and marginalisation. One can also interpret Weems' inclusion of royalty as a sign of courage and perseverance, that through the suffering and branding, Black people as a whole are not robbed of their highborn status.



The first four daguerreotypes, commissioned by Louis Agassiz, were taken of an enslaved father and his daughters for an anthropological study with the idea of creating archival documentation of the anatomical differences between black and white people. (Raymond, 2015) Caricatures like "The Hottentot Venus" were used as symbols of the sexual differences between white and black people. (Singer & Williams, 2010) One can interpret Weems' incorporation of female nudity as a reclamation of black female sexuality that has been perverted, presenting these women in the nude as a suit of armour. It can also be inferred that this detail represents a level of victimisation, allowing these women to be seen as the victims they always were. Weems'

inclusion of these photos illuminates the ways white America has seen itself in comparison to the black subject, but by also enlarging and cropping photos among the others, shifts the focus to the subjects themselves as humans rather than a scientific experiment. (The Museum of Modern Art, NYC, 2021) She then has them tinted blood red to emphasise the spilt blood of the oppressed and indicate the prolonged violent history that had been inflicted on black people. (The Museum of Modern Art, NYC, 2021) These prints were each placed in round mats to create an analogy of the camera lens; here, the audience is placed in the role of the passive observer, taking stills of moments in history in which blackness has been forced to be contorted. Weems then overlays each image with text that she has written about social injustice, so the project's entirety can read like a grim poem beginning with “*From Here I Saw What Happened,*” and ending with “*and I cried.*” (The Museum of Modern Art, NYC, 2021)

Ending the installation with “And I cried” elicits this air of defeat, that only the tears of sorrow and despair are all Weems, the subjects, and we as the audience can do to combat the violence they’re experiencing as each perspective shifts. All parties interacting with the installation, i.e, Weems, the subjects, and the audience, are all voyeurs to the sadism of white supremacy. Some are experiencing it first person (Weems, the subjects, black people), second person (the passive observer Weems has created), and third person (the audience Weems is addressing). The second-person perspective that Weems has created within this installation is a personification of the bystander effect. These are complicit actors of white supremacy who internally are against it, and this is shown through the camera lens POV. Weems' decision to humanise each subject of the installation changes the tone in which the pictures are reflected to the viewer. The terror and pain felt in these images are more evident in the eyes of the passive observer. However, since these photos exist, it can be inferred that Weems is exposing

voyeuristic sadism by correlating the bystander's compliance via taking the photos with the continuation of the torture of black people. Weems then emphasises the humiliation's focal point in knowing what's happening is wrong and continuing to be a participant, even if it's for survival. It then reflects on the victim as confirmation that there is no escape because everyone else is willing to play a part in their demise. The Third-Person perspective speaks more to the present day and the audience confronted with the system. Here, it can be inferred that through Weems' creation, she is questioning our current society in its complicity by limiting black trauma expression to that of just an art form rather than engaging with the inescapable repercussions of living in this kind of society. With this series' timeline ending in the 60s, it doesn't account for the post-Civil Rights era and the many ways in which oppression has mutated; however, being that it was created in 1995, there's an implicit petition for acknowledgement. Weems is not asking for them to look at today; rather, she is begging them to stop pretending that the history doesn't exist. How can we move forward and look to a better future if we have not wrestled and made peace with the past? The ending phrase "*and I cried*" is seeking the release of guilt and shame that we all feel as a result of learning what our ancestors experienced or put others through. Our society has become frozen in time, unable to heal the wounds that have become sepsis, prolonging an era of suffering to all those who refuse to admit its presence. Therefore, it looks at where we are in 2025.

After *From Here I Saw What Happened, and I cried, 1995-96*, release, many critiques had been sparked up in black creative spaces about Weems potentially revictimizing the dead and, more specifically, her role as a black woman viewing those debasing images, nor hiding the fact that she saw them. (Raymond, 2015) "The Crucible of Witnessing: Projects of Identity in Carrie Mae Weems' *From Here I Saw What Happened And I Cried*" recounts a comment made

by Eddie Chambers stating that “a significant number of racist images ought to be set aside and not given periodic kisses of life, even if resuscitation takes place by an African-American artist under the guise of a knowing and artistic deconstruction and engagement with the USA’s racist past.” (Raymond, 2015) Statements like these are akin to more present-day critiques of persistent Slave and Civil Rights Movement Film and television productions as the only means of work for black creatives. Although many factors in both discussions have legitimacy, saying that there should be a closure or limitation to the amount of creative production of Black history and the trauma that emerges within it is a byproduct of voyeuristic sadism. Inadvertently, those who say things like this don’t necessarily realise how they are feeding white supremacy by contributing to the intentional erasure of racism; in fact, the grandeur of the violence is supposed to stun the recipient and onlookers so that they are too afraid or uncomfortable to fight against it. When you stand in that discomfort, you disturb the gratification that the oppressors can harvest from these instances, because then they have to be confronted with the reality of the harm they are inflicting. Those who feel that displaying these images of their ancestors reopens them to continued victimisation and humiliation need to understand that there is no change without accountability, and there is no accountability if there isn’t public acknowledgement. Our ancestors suffered in silence for centuries; the world must see the truth so it can never happen again.

## Bibliography

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