

“The End is the Beginning and Lies Far Ahead”¹

Time and Textuality in African American Visualizations of the Historical Past, 1990-2000

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The powerful discourses that emerged in the closing decades of the 20th century surrounding history's temporal and narratological demise were especially problematic for those seeking to represent the historical past from an African American perspective. Indeed, one of the greatest inadequacies of the postmodern lens for Black cultural readings is that its late-capitalist derivations already boast a long history for people whose (collective and individual) identity was systematically fragmented by “the Other.” As Toni Morrison remarks, “Black women had to deal with ‘post-modern’ problems in the 19th century and earlier [...] certain kinds of dissolution, the loss of and the need to reconstruct certain kinds of stability.”² Indeed, to consider Morrison's temporally-driven storytelling against the backdrop of Fredric Jameson's assertion that “we now inhabit the synchronic rather than the diachronic” and that “our psychic experience, our cultural languages, are today dominated by categories of space rather than by categories of time” exposes the insurmountable formal and ethical gulf between their visions.³ This is largely because the ‘End of History’ perspective that Jameson describes not only undermines the importance of previously marginalized historical narratives, but also threatens the creative potential that they carry. Within this late-20th-century context, however, formal methods-of-making traditionally associated with postmodernism's depthless simulacra were deployed by African American artists as visual devices of critical rupture. Carrie Mae Weems, Glenn Ligon, and Lorna Simpson's visualizations of the historical past creatively subvert the perceived obstacles of historiographical representation by weaponizing the temporal flattening and narratological textualization of history promoted by Jameson, Jean Baudrillard, Hayden White, and others in the 1980s and beyond. By constructing intertemporal dialogues between text- and image-based signifiers their work thus offers a visualization of American history that critically refracts the epistemological and ethical implications of traditional postmodernist conceptualizations of history and its representation.

1. Time vs. Space

Speaking in 1766 of *Laocoön and His Sons*, Gotthold Ephraim Lessing proclaimed that “since this single moment receives from art an unchanging duration, it should express nothing essentially transitory.”⁴ Unearthed over one hundred years previously in Rome, the sculpture’s portrayal of a ‘single moment’ in time appeared to support Lessing’s reiteration of the Aristotelian belief that the visual and literary are distinguished by their varying ability to mediate time. According to this view, time-driven narrative is the preserve of the written or spoken word, whilst the sculpted or painted object is above all concerned with spatial portrayal. However, in the late-1980s and 1990s critics like Bryan Wolf and W.J.T. Mitchell began to interrogate this narrativity-based division between word- and image-based arts and sought instead to “reunify them under the common banner of representation.”⁵

One of the ways that art historians challenged the presumed ‘a-temporality’ of non-literary arts in this period was through applying the poststructuralist conceit that every ‘text’ converses with those before, around, and beyond it; that is, that it functions intertextually.⁶ Norman Bryson, for example, proposed a ‘visual poetics’ that is “established by dissolving the frame around the work;”⁷ and Wendy Steiner argued against what she terms the ‘hyper-semantic’ reading of paintings that divest them of their intertextual potential; proposing rather that

it is only by viewing paintings in light of other paintings or works of literature, music, and so forth that the “missing” semiotic power of pictorial art can be augmented – which is to say that the power is not missing at all, but merely absent in the conventional account of the structure of art.⁸

This “semiotic power” was widely deployed by visual artists like Sherrie Levine and Cindy Sherman who remake readymade images and visual motifs, and Richard Prince and Barbara Kruger, who commit wholesale appropriations of visual culture in order to reflect a perceived societal deadening of the senses. However, because of the regurgitative nature of these processes, their resultant imagery is associated with a form of postmodernism that repeats rather than

regenerates visual signs within a society for which “depth is replaced by surface, or by multiple surfaces” and thus “what is often called intertextuality is [...] no longer a matter of depth.”⁹

2. The End of History. And its return

This ascribed depthlessness of the cultural psyche (and what it produces) also had important implications for how time is perceived and represented. As Jan Verwoert highlights, writers like Craig Owens spoke of a society in the throes of “an intense sense of an interruption of temporal continuity, a black-out of historic time,” which responded by “turn[ing] its tropes into inanimate figures, into pre-objectified, commodified visual material, ready to pick up and use.”¹⁰ With the according emphases on freeze-framing, repetition, simulacrum, and suspension that such a perspective invites, scholars of Black cultural production have voiced strong reservations about the apposition of this lens to the reading of their subjects. As Kimberly Chabot Davis observes, this rejection is largely due to the “concern that real history was being replaced by historicism [and] the textualizing of time as a mere representation.”¹¹

The writings of Hayden White were of course hugely influential in generating ideas surrounding the textualization of history. Since the late-1970s White has argued that historiographic and literary representation are equivalently bound to authorial emplotment and constructed modes of narrativity:

Stories are told or written, not found. And as for the notion of a true story, this is virtually a contradiction in terms. All stories are fictions. Which means, of course, that they can be true only in a metaphorical sense and in the sense in which a figure of speech can be true.¹²

Whilst rhetorically seductive, such a view is not without its dangers. Denying the attainability of truth, fact, and historical reality carries the risk of collapsing each account of the past onto a common plane of “textuality” regardless of authorial motivation, ideology, or wider corroboration. Of course, in its very nature time does insert itself between us and then, and us and them; put another way, time distorts our ability to mediate the *past present*, or that which once existed,

because we are only capable of constructing the *present past*, as we imagine it to have been.¹³ Whilst this unassailable fact appears to resist ascendancy, we know that it can at least be confronted. The historical past is mediated variously across disciplines: from evidence-based textbooks to diary-inspired novels and object-led exhibitions. And whilst representations of the historical past are now accepted —indeed by many embraced— to be coloured by *the representor* this acknowledgment need not result in a flattening of each story’s epistemological, creative, or moral worth.

But further to interrogations of history’s “literary turn,” the “death of historical meaning” described by writers like Jameson and Baudrillard in the same period was problematized by “the re-emergence of a multiplicity of histories in the historic moment of the 1990s.”¹⁴ As Verwoert outlines, a shift thus occurred that redirected attention

away from a primary focus on the arbitrary and constructed character of the linguistic sign towards a desire to understand the performativity of language and grasp precisely how things are done with words, that is, how language through its power of interpellation and injunction enforces the meaning of what it spells out.¹⁵

This alternative orientation of how language might be utilized to mediate the historical past is an important model of linguistic play; one that embraces the socially interactive function of language by celebrating its performative potential. Although such an approach maintains the knowing and essentially self-conscious sensibility of its forebears it rejects outright their creative interpretation to inevitably involve “the accumulation of dead matter of hollowed out signs,” and asserts instead that “what was deemed dead speech has indeed manifest effects on the lives of the living.”¹⁶

2. Textuality

A creative focus on resurrection rather than regurgitation offers specific opportunities for artists re-presenting historical narratives that carry historiographic and/or ethical obstacles in ‘the present’. For African American artists approaching the task of visualizing American history and its afterlives, the subversion of White representational strategies is an important method of critique.

Artists such as Renée Green and Carla Williams deploy performative and photographic mediations of selfhood in order to destabilize the visual power dynamics between viewer and viewed first imposed during the historical construction of race.¹⁷ Carrie Mae Weems and Lorna Simpson are also most often discussed in relation to their works' formal disruption of the dominating gaze and its desire to possess the Subject. Scholars like Lisa Gail Collins and Cherise Smith focus their analyses on how Simpson and Weems delineate and debunk constructed subjectivities through using text-image combinations.¹⁸ As Smith notes, Simpson's inclusion of "text-plaques [is] crucial to the artist's investigation of the relationship between photographs and text and of the narratives these elements imply."¹⁹ Smith's emphasis on narrative here is important, and she returns to it in her discussion of Weems's photographic installation *From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried* (1995-96), arguing that the work functions to "link the past and present experiences of African Americans" by "collaps[ing] time and space."²⁰

From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried depicts photography's role in how the Black subject has been historically defined by the White gaze. But whilst redirecting the examining lens onto the representor, the work also restores subjectivity to the represented. As Weems explains, "when we're looking at these images, we're looking at the ways in which Anglo America —white America— saw itself in relationship to the black subject. I wanted to intervene in that by giving a voice to a subject that historically has had no voice."²¹ The desire to proffer agency to individuals whose identity has been externally framed for economic, political, and personal gain is the primary content of Weems's representation. But in addition to spotlighting constructed narratives of race, *From Here I Saw What Happened* also controverts fictive narratives of progression. The images have been curated in a variety of ways, but Weems created the work in the first instance to operate from left-to-right and/or top-to-bottom; in other words, the viewer's eye is led from image one to image twenty-seven and thus from the earliest to the most recent photograph. This apparent conformity with Western narratological tradition has two important results. The first is that the viewer reads *From Here I Saw What Happened* chronologically; and the second is that the viewer reads it as a narrative. These are not, of course, mutually inclusive requirements. Consider how many films, novels, and television programmes flit between the past, present, and future in order to "tell their story," and how crucial this structural device is for reader/viewer configuration of the narrative. Indeed, Weems discusses the narrativity of *From Here I Saw What Happened* in such

terms, explaining that whilst each image represents “a singular moment” they “go on to make a more complex story [and therefore] in a way it’s like a film.”²²

From Here I Saw What Happened’s ‘filmic’ effect serves to undermine the traditional association between a-temporality and the visual arts because it depends on the emplotment of individual units along a linear axis. The first-order narrative that this structural device implies is subsequently amplified by Weems’s content. Whilst the renewal of its Subjects’ agency is crucial to the installation, it is nevertheless provided by the artist’s voice: “You Became a Scientific Profile,” “You Became Mammie, Mama, Mother,” “You Became Uncle Tom Johan & Clemens’ Jim,” “Some Said You Were The Spitting Image of Evil.” For each of the textual insertions that Weems makes, then, the words “You” (and “Your”) replace “I” (and “Mine”) which highlights the artist’s refusal to ventriloquize for Subjects of historical reality. Of course, the question of who speaks for whom is crucial to our understanding of the historical past and its retelling. As Alan Robinson highlights, “narrative alterations between analepsis, from the perspective of the authorial narrator and present-day readers, and prolepsis, from the perspective of the historical agents, opens up the possibility of irony, which one might regard as historical narrative’s default position.”²³ The form of irony to which Robinson refers is literary in its character and operates on the premise that the narrative’s reader/viewer is aware of significations of which its characters are ignorant. For Weems this default position enables her to restore her characters’ agency through retrospective knowledge, but via an authorial voice that formally, and forcefully, signals its own presence.

Like *From Here I Saw What Happened*, Glenn Ligon’s *Runaways* (1993) depends on a collection of repetitive forms: ten lithographs printed on thick cream paper, which, as Huey Copeland observes, possess a “sumptuous facture that is a far cry from the utilitarian look and feel of the original handbills that inspired them” (figure 1.1).²⁴

[INSERT FIGURE 1.1. HERE]

Glenn Ligon, *Runaways*, 1993, Suite of 10 lithographs, 16 x 12 inches (40.7 x 30.5 cm) [copyright symbol] Glenn Ligon; Image courtesy of the artist, Luhring Augustine, New York, Regen Projects, Los Angeles, and Thomas Dane Gallery, London

However, in contrast to Weems's insertion of the authorial voice, Ligon dispossesses him-Self through the authorial voice of an-Other. The subject matter of the series is the artist—linguistically drawn by ten associates and relayed through brown ink typeface. Some of the descriptions focus on the physical outline of the man (“He’s a shortish broad-shouldered black man, pretty dark-skinned, with glasses, kind of stocky”), and others elect to conjure up something of the man himself (“He has a sweet voice, is quiet. Appears somewhat timid”). But whilst the subject matter of *Runaways* is Glenn Ligon as described by others, its content is the textual mediation of the Black Subject “then and now.”

Unlike Weems's re-presentation of specific historical agents, Ligon's *Runaways* evokes a generic figure—the “runaway slave”—but with an apparent devotion to particularity. This effect strongly echoes the character of texts produced in the 18th-century period for “runaway” posters, one of which offers a \$100 reward for the return of “Emily” described as “Seventeen years of age, well grown, black color, has a whining voice,” and another the same sum for “Robert Porter,” “aged 19; heavy, stoutly made; dark chestnut complexion, rather sullen countenance.” Like these examples, even those descriptions in *Runaways* that reference Ligon's race late (or less) they nevertheless make “apparent [...] the way [that] the black male body in any description, however benign, bears some relation to a history of stereotype and racial prejudice.”²⁵ In this way, *Runaways*' threading of a contemporary subject matter via an historical form of representation reveals how both time and identity are flattened upon and through the Black subject. The content that emerges is therefore neither the past nor the present, but the unacknowledged violence of their linguistic, and psychic, interdependency.

3. Intertextuality

“As creatures living in time, humans are constantly in transition from the elusive present into a future which itself soon becomes the ever-receding past,” and which can therefore only be conceived by observing the tangible traces of its events, lives, and actions.²⁶ Such traces are often framed in semiotic terms, “as signifiers which stand for the signified, “the past” [...] which correspond to a non-linguistic reality or *referent*.”²⁷ The challenge for those wishing to visualize such a reality is thus both formal and moral; for the question is not simply of how such signifiers

are deployed but also of why. In creative literature, the reuse of an existing signifier within the production of a new text is most often referred to as a “borrowing” —a term that carries an automatically benign characterization of returning something because it will always belong elsewhere. In the visual arts the term used is “appropriation,” which, conversely, hints at finality and theft. Throughout the 1980s the technique of appropriation was pinned to a model of simulacrum for which “any notion of radical critique had become an impossibility with the merging of reality and its media representation.”²⁸ As David Evans outlines, this model is associated with “a certain time (late 1970s and 1980s); a certain place (New York); certain influential galleries (Metro Pictures, Sonnabend); and certain artists who were critically located within ambitious debates around the postmodern.”²⁹ However, in the late-1980s and 1990s the possibility emerged for a “materialist model” of appropriation which “describes art production as the gradual re-shuffling of a basic set of cultural terms through their strategical re-use and eventual transformation.”³⁰ Verweert’s use of the word “transformation” is fundamental to this model of appropriation’s function, which is defined by criticality rather than indifference, and which offers distinctive opportunities for artists visualizing the problematic nature of history’s temporal and textual conception.

The historical signifiers that Weems appropriates and resurrects in *From Here I Saw What Happened* derive from museum and university collections, including Louis Aggasiz’s commissioned “portraits” of enslaved people from the Harvard Collection.³¹ These signifiers thus not only correspond to the historically-located referent (19th-century slavery, scientific racism, comparative anatomy) but also to their contemporary collection, preservation, and some time display. By indexing their historical function so clearly (“You Became a Scientific Profile”), Weems signals the ease with which we disassociate ourselves from such images and their proclaimed intentions. However, the installations’ formal unity through colouring, framing, and scale prohibits any facile ethical differentiation to be made between “You Became a Negroid Type” (image two) and “In Your Sing Song Prayer You Asked Didn’t My Lord Deliver Daniel?” (image twenty-seven). Crucially, however, this collapse of the narrative’s trajectory does not undermine temporality, but rather subverts its deep-seated association with teleological progression. The placement of two images of identical but inverted side-portraits of Nubian women on either side of the installation visualizes this Black subversion of traditional European

forms of narrativity. Presented as exchangeable temporal bookends the images carry a single sentence across them —“From Here I Saw What Happened/And I Cried”— which is, of course, also the work’s title. Looking forwards towards the *past future* and backwards towards the *present past*, the portraits oversee a narrative that moves diachronically across time and back again but without evolution; they therefore mourn not only for its Subjects, but also for chronology’s inadequacy as a formal explication of the Black American experience.

Exposing the deficiencies of post-Enlightenment models of progress to the reading of how African American people have experienced history is also a central content of Ligon’s *Runaways*. Refusing to adhere to the premise that we must either be standing still or moving forward in time Ligon pulls texts from disparate regions of the historical past and creatively weaves them together. As Julia Kristeva theorized in the wake of Mikhail Bakhtin’s critique of historicist literary criticism, texts hold “the status of *mediator*, linking structural models to cultural (historical) environment” and therefore bring their authorial origins and associative discourses into any newly-formed configurations.³² Of course, European historiographical discourse traditionally privileges the written text over all mediatory forms, including oral, performative, and visual. And whilst the foci of this cultural veneration have, of course, shifted over time —from Rankean promotions of the written archive to late-20th-century commentaries on historical realism— they uniformly prioritize word-based texts for inspection and/or critique.

However, the visual intertextuality deployed by Weems and Ligon depends upon both word- and image-based texts that have been appropriated from temporally distinct historical environments. Indeed, although the inclusion of written descriptions in *Runaways* appears to supersede the visual motifs with which they are paired, when their compositions are compared with authentic historical “runaway” posters this imbalance is revealed to be illusory. The descriptive texts on 18th-century posters spill into the furthest corners of their paper’s edge; and the heavy use of bold typeface, capital letters, racial terminology, and exclamation marks imbue a maniacal character that is both optically and psychologically overwhelming. But the texts inserted into Ligon’s *Runaways* are physically restrained by their consistent font and size, as well the uniformity of their indentations and the black square margins that contain them. Above each box Ligon plants a single image, which is appropriated from the 18th-century cultural environment—all but one of which depicts

a “runaway slave.” Embedded on the tenth lithograph, however, is an apparently oppositional signifier: Josiah Wedgwood’s illustration of a chained, kneeling man, which was designed to be stamped onto abolitionist literature and pamphlets in conjunction with the text “Am I Not a Man and a Brother?” (figure 1.2). The sole figure who remains enslaved in *Runaways* is, then, the emblem of abolitionism.

[INSERT FIGURE 1.2 HERE]

Detail: Glenn Ligon, *Runaways*, 1993, Suite of 10 lithographs, 16 x 12 inches (40.7 x 30.5 cm) [copyright symbol] Glenn Ligon; Image courtesy of the artist, Luhring Augustine, New York, Regen Projects, Los Angeles, and Thomas Dane Gallery, London

By flattening the dominant culture’s representations of the Black subject across apparently divergent moral perspectives Ligon draws attention to their similitude; and the emblem’s notoriously subservient posture becomes a stark visualization of White patronage: praying (or) begging for release to a “higher power.” The homogeny of the representor is thus delineated through a coded visualization of equivalent attitudes towards the task of representing, echoing the innate racializations that fill the word-based descriptions produced over two centuries later.

4. Intertemporal Intertextuality

Although anachronism is most often conceived as an unhelpful view of the *past present* it is also a vital tool for producing accounts of it. Not only does the historian’s temporal removal from the context that s/he draws allow the emplotment of each text into a position of (cultural or temporal) relevance, it also permits a ‘complete’ past to be perceived. This is because temporal distance results in “the modern historian’s knowledge [being] in some ways greater than that of agents at the time, in that s/he has more information, a wider contextual and chronological overview and can compare several accounts of the same event.”³³ This anachronistic overview of events, actions, and experiences that have already occurred allows, indeed encourages, historians to scour the past for catalysts whose future effects could never have been perceived at the time (Franz Ferdinand’s assassination, the Treaty of Versailles, Rosa Parks’s refusal to stand, etc.). Indeed, as Arthur C. Danto observes, “Not knowing how it is all going to end is the mark of living through events.”³⁴ The challenge that this epistemological privilege entails is, then, an ethical one of restraint. In other

words, historians must achieve a balance between retrospective insight and contemporaneous ignorance when proposing the causes and effects of historical agents' experiences.

Lorna Simpson's formal choices not only spotlight her photographs' content as a collection of readymade signifiers but also interrogates the ethical complacency that anachronistic overview can incite. In the late-1980s and 1990s Simpson's practice evolved from a focus on the "didactic, communicative, and social aspects of documentary photography" into a "critique [of] the objectivity, veracity, and authority with which documentary photographs are invested."³⁵ But Simpson's work also contains important intertemporal signposts. By combining the high conceptualist tropes of stark compositions, text plaques, and black-and-white film, Simpson underlines how important these formal devices were to historically-located forms of myth-making, such as 19th-century "specimen portraits." This correlation between presentational techniques of the past and present thus conflates the presumed archaic character of history with that of our own supposed enlightenment by splicing together trans-temporal approaches towards 'straightforwardly' depicting the Subject.

In works like *Outline* (1990) Simpson very literally subverts this "straightforwardness" by facing her figures "straight-backward". A photographic diptych presenting two different representations of a "back," *Outline*'s first image is composed of a braid of hair manipulated into a three-sided rectangle with the word 'back' inserted through a textual plaque. The second image shows the back of a female with short hair and exposed shoulder blades overlaid with a plaque listing the words "lash," "bone," "ground," "ache" and "pay." The lexical choices here signify the (Black) female's extinct and extant societal role(s) and their perceptual overlap. "Ground," for example, can be read both literally and figuratively: as working the ground/soil, but also as worked into it; whilst "pay" can be read as an action that is both done by and to you (to pay/to be made to pay). However, despite this semantic approach giving the impression of relinquishing mastery over to the viewer, it is in fact the viewer who is being mastered. The built-in ambiguity of *Outline*'s identity frustrates our innate desire to own the Subject through sight – that most domineering of senses — and we are forced, instead, to construct her from piecemeal fragments of scattered words, familiar compositions, and visual tropes. The power that Simpson's formal approach appears to

accord the viewer therefore ultimately functions to expose who “we” are by visually triggering our historically-borne presumptions, prejudices, and beliefs.

The question of authorial construction in *From Here I Saw What Happened* is also more complicated than first appears. As we have seen, Weems’s visualization of the historical past operates diachronically and depends upon a mutual reciprocity between its parts. This reciprocity is mediated starkly by Weems’s presentation of the images that carry the texts: each print is positioned within a circular frame that physically confiscates the image’s original context, which, as Mary Drach McInnes highlights, ‘dissects’ the original images to produce “the effect [...] of a lens focusing on a specimen.”³⁶ Whilst the visual pastiche of pseudo-scientific anthropology is central to Weems’s critique of dominating systematizations of race it also enables her to focus on particular compositional elements. The primary focus of many of the images is the face of its Subject(s), which forces the viewer into a direct visual encounter with the historical agent presented. For others, Weems elects to zoom in on one or two figures within a larger group, such as in “You Became the Joker’s Joke,” or a single part of a group portrait, such as in “Anything But What You Were Ha.” But regardless of her compositional choices, Weems’s dissection of pre-existing images underlines the fact that “this was something taken from something else [...] [it] was lifted,” and thereby ensures that each image is perceived as a record of the authentic historical past rather than its lens-based simulacrum.³⁷ Weems’s determination to spotlight her role as author and appropriator is also made increasingly explicit as the installation progresses through noticeable shifts in the linguistic character of the texts overlaying each visual record. For earlier images the textual sensibility appears to adhere to the self-purporting objectivity of their original function (“You Became an Anthropological Debate”), whilst those used later contain multiple signifiers (“Black and Tanned Your Whipped Wind of Change Howled Low Blowing Itself – Ha – Smack into The Middle of Ellington’s Orchestra Billie Heard It Too & Cried Strange Fruit Tears”). Through this rhythmic change of textual form and content Weems draws attention to both the authority and elasticity of language.

Like the photographs that they cover, each word, sentence, or phrase deployed carries its own cultural referents into a new context, but their signification is also made anew by their intertextual positioning. Image twenty-four, for example, shows a Black nanny holding her White charge and

over it lies the words “Others Said ‘Only Thing a Niggah Could Do Was Shine My Shoes’”. Alone this image offers a furious exposé of White hypocrisies, but when read in the center of image twenty-three and twenty-five its signification expands. The latter contains part of a boot-shining shop logo overlaid with the words “You Became Boots, Spades & Coons,” and the former carries the text “Some Laughed Long & Hard & Loud” across the photograph of a bi-racial couple each holding a well-dressed baby chimpanzee. Taken at Central Park Zoo in 1967 by Garry Winogrand the unknown couple’s action was intended as a subversive literalizing of racist tropes. But, like Weems’s inclusion of Robert Mapplethorpe’s *Man in Polyester Suit* (1980), what is more important here than its discursive implication is the continued recognizability of such a trope at all. The three texts therefore join to read: “Some Laughed Long & Hard – Others Said ‘Only Thing a Niggah Could Do Was Shine My Shoes’ – You Became Boots, Spades & Coons.” Black subjectivity is thus exposed to three forms of linguistic confinement: ridicule, subservience, and dismissal. And whilst each method of derision is, as Weems suggests, a “singular moment,” the repetitive visualization of their equivalence flattens the relevance of time passed.³⁸ But this is not a deployment of the depthless repetition of “hollowed out signs” that the “End of History” viewpoint observes; like Ligon’s *Runaways* series and Simpson’s *Outline* it is instead a visualization of the past and present via an intertemporal intertextuality of their signifiers.

5. Time and Textuality

For artists seeking to visualize the historical past its signifiers contain “the manifold traces of earlier activities, to whose former existence they bear witness” and the question of how to represent them requires careful handling.³⁹ Referred to by Morrison in literary terms as “a kind of [...] archaeology” this process of gathering the extant remains of the past is used to inform creative “reconstruct[ions] of the world that [they] imply.”⁴⁰ It is, therefore, a subjective activity of selection and curation that is dictated as much by *what* remains are uncovered as it is by *how* they are subsequently framed. To give an equal footing to both content and form in this way may appear to adhere to the constructionist viewpoint, which argues for their textual equivalence.⁴¹ But, as we have seen, questions surrounding history’s veracity are complicated by authorial motivation and method. The works of Weems, Ligon, and Simpson cannot therefore be associated with a hollow form of simulacrum responding to “a new depthlessness” and “a consequent weakening of

historicity” because the belief in an authentic historical past is crucial to both the making and reading of them.⁴² Indeed, if “the historical discourse of our civilization” depends upon “the process of signification [...] filling out meaning,” as Roland Barthes attests, then the visualizations created by Weems, Simpson, and Ligon function anarchically.⁴³ Not only do they interrogate established narratives of moral progression, they also confiscate the possibility of encountering any solution other than historical discourse’s incapacity to describe content that is without temporal conclusion.

As Ashraf Rushdy underlines, an “insistence on the interdependence of past and present” by African American artists is “a political act, for it advocates a revisioning of the past as it is filtered through the present.”⁴⁴ In the works studied here, this politicism is directed towards both history and its representation, and exploits the tropes of both. By directly appropriating postmodern methods of historiographical critique Weems, Ligon, and Simpson do not so much seek to create new versions of the historical past, but to invent new visual languages for its intertemporal resurrection in “the present.”

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Notes

¹ Ellison, 5.

² Morrison, 178.

³ Jameson, 16.

⁴ Lessing, 17.

⁵ Wolf, 198-199.

⁶ The term 'intertextuality' was first used by Julia Kristeva in *Word, Dialogue, Novel* (1966), which introduced the Russian formalist Mikhail Bakhtin to Western scholarship. It will be discussed further here.

⁷ Bryson, 187.

⁸ Steiner, 58.

⁹ Jameson, 12.

¹⁰ Verwoert, 147.

¹¹ Davis, 247.

¹² White (1999), 9. See also White (1987).

¹³ Koselleck's conceptualisation of present past, past present, and past future emerges in his discussion of modern perceptions of temporality (1985) – terms now widely used by historiographers.

¹⁴ Verwoert, 152.

¹⁵ Ibid., 152-3.

¹⁶ Ibid., 152.

¹⁷ See, for example, Renée Green's *Seen from Anatomies of Escape* (1990) and Carla Williams's *How to Read Character* (1990-91). References are not in the bibliography should they be as artworks rather than publications? If so, happy to include

¹⁸ See Collins, *The Art of History* and Smith "Fragmented Documents:".

¹⁹ Smith, 249.

²⁰ Ibid., 254.

²¹ Weems (2000).

²² Weems (2011).

²³ Robinson, 32.

²⁴ Copeland, 91.

²⁵ Ibid., 95.

²⁶ Robinson, 4.

²⁷ Ibid., 4.

²⁸ Evans, (2009), 13.

²⁹ Evans (2009), 15.

³⁰ Verwoert (2007), 146.

³¹ Agassiz commissioned the original daguerreotypes in 1850 to evidence his theory of an evolution of "races." They were made by the South Carolina-based photographer Joseph T. Zealey and remained at Harvard University where Agassiz was based as the first Director of Harvard's Museum of Comparative Zoology.

³² Kristeva, 37. Her emphasis.

³³ Robinson, 2011, 21.

³⁴ Danto, 294.

³⁵ Smith (1999), 246.

³⁶ McInnes (1999), 5.

³⁷ Weems (2011).

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Robinson, 4.

⁴⁰ Morrison (1990), 302.

⁴¹ See, for example, White (1987) and Ankersmit.

⁴² Jameson, 6.

⁴³ Barthes, 16

⁴⁴ Rushdy, 567.