Sisterhood: Locating the Photography of Carrie Mae Weems, LaToya Ruby Frazier, and Deana Lawson Within a Rhizome of Black Feminist Discourse

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Sisterhood: Locating the Photography of Carrie Mae Weems, LaToya Ruby Frazier, and Deana Lawson Within a Rhizome of Black Feminist Discourse

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The Division of the Arts
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By
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PREFACE

The first African American photographer I was introduced to was Carrie Mae Weems, specifically her *Kitchen Table Series (1990)* during my freshman year of undergrad. It was significant that she also happened to be a woman. While I cannot verify that Weems was the absolute first Black photographer I knew of, there are no names that precede hers in my memory. I imagine that it was our shared social identities and a seeming moment of mutual seeing that etched her images into my mind. My photography professor, Em Rooney, showed us several images from the *Kitchen Table Series* in my introductory photography course, and I recall being less engaged with the images from the series but was more interested in the possibilities of a photographic body of work. *Kitchen Table Series* functioned in various ways that I had not previously encountered, as self-portraits but also as constructed scenes. I was struck by the repetition of a single vantage point, and the very clear narrative that the images produced all together. While I had not yet critically examined Weems’ images from this series, the *Kitchen Table Series* played a large role in informing my own photographic practice in its early stages of development. From that point on, I was drawn to having text accompany my images, and embraced the constructed scene as something that didn’t have to speak to the aesthetics of fashion or studio imagery, but could be a tool for storytelling and that storytelling didn’t have to be shocking or entertaining but could be mundane and rather quiet.

It was in the same era of my first two years of college that I also discovered LaToya Ruby Frazier’s photography, specifically her images from the *Notion of Family*. At this point in my photographic studies I had begun to make a habit out of adding all of the photographers that came up in class conversations to an ongoing list, almost like an archive of what I had learned so far. Naturally I wasn’t so consistent with this as I wouldn’t record the names of artists whose
work I didn’t find striking, but I recall my own memorization of Frazier’s name immediately after my discovery of her work. Frazier validated my own interest in diaristic photography, as I had previously wished I thought more similarly to my peers who seemed to be struck with an idea for a photograph or a scene long before constructing their images. My approach was grounded in something that Em told me in our introductory class together, to “always carry my camera around”. I liked my photographs most when they were spontaneous and were more like documentation than invention. Frazier’s images around her house and with her mother seemed to share a similar spontaneity and diaristic quality that made her work pierce me. Unlike my initial experience with *Kitchen Table Series*, it was Frazier’s photographs that stuck with me and encouraged me to continue carrying my camera with me wherever I went. Before encountering *Notion of Family*, I recall thinking diaristic photography was rather selfish, and felt discouraged to continue producing work in that vein. I began to realize that there was a certain magic to self-portraiture, both in *Kitchen Table Series* and in *Notion of Family*, but wasn’t able to define what that magic was itself. All I could understand was that Frazier and Weems were two artists at the top of my list, and that whenever I thought about them I thought about them together and then in relation to myself. It was significant that all three of us were black women who use the camera to document our circumstances, using the photograph as visual proof of our lives.

Unlike Weems and Frazier, Deana Lawson’s photographic work was a rather recent discovery for me, as I grew interested in her during the fall semester of my senior year in 2021. I was first drawn to her highly staged and constructed color images as an antithesis to my interest in *Kitchen Table Series* and *Notion of Family*, even though Weems’ *Kitchen Table Series* and Lawson’s images converge in methods as both consist of staged scenes. Devoid of the spontaneity and diaristic feel of Weems’ and Frazier’s works, I was curious as to how Lawson’s
photographs disrupted the sweeping generalizations I had come to make about black women photographers who worked in domestic contexts. It feels accurate to describe Lawson’s domestic images as disruptions, especially in images of hers that blur the line between the mundane and the fantastical. My thoughts on Deana Lawson at the beginning of this project were much more shallow than the thoughts I had come to develop around *Kitchen Table Series* and *Notion of Family*. At the same time I noticed that this sense of newness and excitement around Deana Lawson’s work wasn’t unique to myself but seemed to be a common feeling throughout the art world, as Lawson’s work seemed to flood all of its corners during the past four years. In 2018 *Aperture* published Lawson’s first monograph, a collection of forty images bound by a magenta canvas hardcover with “Deana Lawson” spelled out in gold lettering on the cover. In 2020, Lawson won the Hugo Boss Prize for achievement in contemporary art, gaining her a 2021 exhibition of her work at the Guggenheim, titled “*Centropy*”, that was up for five months over the summer. In the next month following the closure of *Centropy*, a second monograph of Lawson’s came out from the collaboration of various institutions, including MoMA PS1 and the Institute of Contemporary Art/Boston, to accompany new survey exhibitions of Lawson’s work that are up currently in 2022 and will extend into 2023. It was this 2021 survey book that introduced me to Lawson’s work in greater detail, and it was one of the first photography books I purchased with the intention of building my own collection as an art historian-in-training.

I like to think about my interest in these three artists as documenting my undergraduate experience. Weems speaks to my freshman year and my newness to photographic practice, identifying familiar faces in what felt like a vast sea of photographers whose names I would never manage to all know at once. Frazier speaks to the following period of comfort I would find

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in photography and to my eventual boredom– her work blurring the boundary between activism and aesthetics and a desire that was beginning to surface in my own practice to blur a boundary between my art-making and historical studies. Deana Lawson speaks to my senior year, which I spent comfortably settled in my art historical studies. It seemed almost too necessary that the three of them be the focus of my discussion in this project, as my engagement in their work also reflects an evolution in my own perspective over the past four years.
A NOTE ON METHOD:
HOW TO EXAMINE ART FROM A FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE

Much of the intellectual framework for this project was informed by Helen Molesworth’s thinking in an essay for a 2010 publication that the Museum of Modern Art produced to anthologize the works of women artists in their collection. The title of Molesworth’s essay, *How To Install Art as a Feminist*, simultaneously functions as a “how to examine art from a feminist perspective”, as her disucssion reimagines an epistemological approach to art historical discourse that rejects Western themes of patriarchy and difference. It is this reimagined approach to art historical analysis that I employ in my research here. Molesworth begins by defining the traditional origins of art historical epistemology which belong to the “Oedipal narrative”, in which “Sons either make an homage to their fathers (Richard Serra to Jackson Pollock), kill their fathers (Frank Stella to Pollock), or pointedly ignore their fathers (Luc Tuymans to Pollock).”

In thinking about where and how art by women could exist within these traditional hierarchies of museum structure and art historical methodology, Molesworth referenced art historian Lisa Tickner’s claims that women artists more often lean towards “attachment rather than separation”. This distinction between an approach that framed itself around ‘attachment’ and an approach that grounded itself in ‘separation’ was key in beginning to understand how I could discuss artists and artworks that fascinated me in a way that subverted traditional approaches to art historical analysis.

I soon realized how predisposed I was to thinking about artists within the “oedipal” structure that Molesworth described. When I chose Carrie Mae Weems, LaToya Ruby Frazier, and Deana

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Lawson as three artists I wanted to discuss in this project, I kept trying to find their ‘fathers’ or imagine them as ‘fathers’ to each other (Weems as a ‘father’ to Frazier and Lawson in some way). Molesworth questioned this approach: “Is it really as simple as reinserting them into a chronological narrative that hasn’t accounted for them?” Instead, Molesworth suggested something that I had not been able to see before: “Unlike the image of the tree – vertical, hierarchical, and evolutionary, the rhizome offers a horizontal, non-linear structure in which all ideas have the possibility of connecting to other ideas.” The idea that Weems, Frazier, and Lawson live symbiotically on Molesworth’s “rhizome” validated my desire to speak about how their works were in conversation with each other. Previously I had been concerned that my choice in grouping the three artists was a bit superficial, and that their shared positioning as black women was a rather essentialist way to put them in conversation with each other. However, within the “rhizome”, the shared positioning of the three artists and their mutual interests in the photographic image allow for the works to converge on various themes that reject the separative quality of the “Oedipal narrative”.

Moving away from the verticality of a father/son structure, Molesworth suggests the horizontal structure of sibling relationships as an alternative as she considers the historical contexts of the terms “fraternity” and “sisterhood”. Molesworth’s recontextualization of the word “Sisterhood”, spoke to the way that I understood Weems, Frazier, and Lawson and how I wanted to examine their works. “Could we re-engage with the language of sisterhood [referencing a use of the term within feminist communities], not as a discourse of essentializing sameness but as a complicated narrative of horizontal or lateral thinking?” This project puts Molesworth’s question to the test, as I am interested in Weems, Lawson and Frazier as forming a “sisterhood” in which their images of black domesticity laterally converge within a “complicated narrative” of black
feminist discourse, where the themes that the three artists visually explore were first critically and intentionally defined. As a means of avoiding the “Oedipal narrative”, this project will be thematically arranged rather than chronologically, allowing for lateral connections to appear where they are relevant and to not be excluded by vertical framing devices such as period and genre.

This investigation of Weems, Frazier, and Lawson as a Sisterhood is divided into three parts that dissect the language of their visual representations of modern black domesticity. The first chapter will investigate the three artists’ use of interior spaces as settings for their photographs. I am interested in how their images speak to a historical archive of photographs that were made in attempts to document black domesticity. My main reference for this section will be a chapter from Saidiya Hartman’s Wayward Lives Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Social Upheaval, where Hartman examines how photography had been used in social scientific communities to visualize black life at the beginning of the twentieth century. The vibrant, densely filled, and meticulously organized interiors of Weems, Frazier, and Lawson seem to reject the desolate and despairing images produced by sociologists and anthropologists about a century earlier. I question how the relationship between these two bodies of imagery document an evolution of how the camera has been relevant to black life in the United States.

From discussing the setting of their images, the second chapter will focus on their content and will examine how Weems, Lawson and Frazier represent domestic relationships, which includes both familial and romantic connections. Lawson’s depictions of domestic relationships are the most impersonal out of the three, as neither she nor her family make appearances in her public photographic work. As Lawson seeks representations of black domesticity from people she meets on the street or in other chance meetings, her photographs source domestic relationships
from outside of herself. Weems works in a similar manner, as she constructs scenes with actors in Kitchen Table Series to play the roles of lovers, friends, and daughters. The spontaneity and diaristic quality of Frazier’s images in Notion of Family give her representations of her mother and her grandmother a sense of authenticity that is more difficult to verify in Lawson’s photographs. However, a throughline exists in their varying approaches to portraiture in the three artists’ autobiographical interest in maternal connection. Michelle Wallace’s text The Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman is my means of discussing this throughline, as Wallace discusses the marginalization of black women within the Black Power Movement and its implications in experiences of both motherhood and daughterhood.

The final chapter will be concerned with how self is represented in the images of the three artists, which requires that we move beyond visual analysis and extend into their processes and intentions. As we mine the selves of Weems, Frazier, and Lawson in their photographs, a chapter from bell hooks’ book, Black Looks: On Race and Representation, titled “The Oppositional Gaze”, will filter our discussion through the unique perspective of black womanhood that bell hooks defines. This chapter will include investigating the artist's other projects, experiences, and methodologies in order to get a sense of how self has been represented outside of the context of the three bodies of work that I emphasize. On one side of this project sits Weems, Frazier, and Lawson, and on the other side sits Hartman, Wallace, and bell hooks. In highlighting these six black women, both artists and scholars, this project will locate the images of Weems, Frazier, and Lawson within a rhizome of black feminist discourse, seeing where their images align with prevalent themes in black feminist theory and where they seem to be irrelevant as well.
CHAPTER ONE
INTERIORS

In her influential book *On Photography*, writer Susan Sontag claimed that “photographs furnish evidence. Something we hear about, but doubt, seems proven when we’re shown a photograph of it.” This line from her famous opening essay titled, “In Plato’s Cave”, reveals a cultural assumption that the west has historically made about the photograph as something objective and adjacent to notions of truth. This cultural assumption has appeared in the scientific community's use of the photograph as evidence to support theory, a methodological approach that is most particular to the social sciences. Ethnographers, anthropologists, and other perpetrators of the colonial sciences during the nineteenth century relied on the photograph to give their theoretical othering a visual representation and reference. As a result, the earliest photographic representations of non-white communities and bodies are tainted with colonial scientific theory and scientific racism, that attempt to justify white supremacy and its manifestations. The contextual history of portrait images that depict non-white peoples are inevitably linked to their scientific origins, and are furthered anchored by textual theory that attempts to explain such images.

Writer and academic Saidiya Hartman deconstructs images of this variety in a chapter of her book, *Wayward Lives Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Social Upheaval*, titled “Minor Figures”. As Hartman reflected on her experience in looking through archives of sociological images from the early twentieth century, she writes that

“'The social worlds represented in these pictures were targeted for destruction and elimination. The reformers used words like “improvement” and “social betterment” and “protection,” but no

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one was fooled. The interracial slum was razed and mapped into homogeneous zones of absolute difference. The black ghetto was born.”

The “black ghetto” and its presence as a cultural signifier of inherent racial inferiority, is a byproduct of the photograph. This is due to the influence of visual ‘othering’ that establishes visual cues hinting towards racial inferiority, so that anyone could identify differences not only through skin tone but through means of living. The photographs fabricated a scientific imaginary of black life in America, through dissecting blackness to reveal its parts and then targeting each in order to deconstruct and eliminate it whole. Scientific theory that is used to ‘explain’ the contents of the images are exhibited through image titles and captions. As photographic theorist Roland Barthes describes in his thinking on the relationship between image and text, the linguistic message functions to help viewers “choose the correct level of perception, [which] permits [them] to focus not only [their] gaze but also [their] understanding.” The linguistic message attaches significance to certain aspects of the photograph, and therefore “has thus a repressive value” in its authority over the way that we read images. As Hartman explains,

The words police and divide: Negro quarter. Announce the vertical order of life: Damaged Goods. Make domestic space available for scrutiny and punishment: One-room moral hazard. Declaim the crime of promiscuous social arrangements: Eight Persons Occupy One Bedroom. Manage and segregate the mixed crowd and represent the world in fidelity to the color line: View of Italian girls, Boys with Cap, and Two Negroes in Doorway of Dilapidated Building.

The language embraces its origins in scientific methodology through its assumed objectivity, resulting in captions that cannot be read as anything other than facts which are proven by the inclusion of photographic evidence. Many of the sociological images that Hartman investigates are initially ambiguous in their significance without the inclusion of text description. One of the

images, taken by the Philadelphia Housing Association, shows a room with furniture laid out around its perimeter. There are no subjects in the room and no hints of who might live there, pictures, decorative objects, etc (Figure 1). The first identification to be made while looking at this picture is whether or not it looks or feels similar to a viewer's own home, family, or community. The social scientific gaze puts towards what is meant to be an objective image of domestic spaces occupied by black people. At the same time, they are produced with an intention to present an unrelatable ‘other’ that opposes cultural rules of what’s appropriate. The language reveals this intention, “‘Home’ - One Room Moral Hazard”, implying that the space is a risk of moral corruption for its occupants. Suddenly what we are looking at is not a home, as the quotations but around the word, “home”, question its validity. The language does not just describe the image but transforms its context completely in a way that disconnects the image from those who occupy the space and reality of the space beyond its photographed form.

These early photographic documents of black domestic life share this quality of disconnect from the people who lived inside the homes, and the captions that further erased the depth of their realities. Visibility, in this sense, only functioned to render communities invisible. In response to these scientific images that silenced and surveyed black life, we find an emergence of photographs and photographers that began to put forward alternative points of view. One example can be found in W.E.B DuBois’ contribution to the Exhibit of American Negros at the 1900 Exposition Universelle (1900 Paris Exposition) held in Paris, France. Although DuBois did not photograph all of the images used in this exhibition himself, collecting them from African American photographers such as Thomas E. Askew and other archives, he curated them with the intention of illustrating black life in America at the turn of the century. DuBois was continuing in the sociological tradition, yet his curation in the exhibit was aligned with the intentions of
Figure 1: “One Room Moral Hazard”, Philadelphia Housing Association.
another organizer of the exhibition, his colleague Thomas Calloway, who argued that the exhibit should demonstrate “what the Negro is doing for himself, through his own organizations.” This emphasis on black autonomy and agency gave no space for scientific erasure of black life and black people, which was previously unseen in sociological practice. The organization of the exhibition itself, a depiction of black life by two black people, is significant to note as well when considering the exhibition's emphasis on black agency. The photograph as an object was necessary to the work of Calloway and DuBois at the 1900 Paris Exposition, as the Exhibit of American Negros would not have been able to express Black American life so visibly. DuBois’ vast archive of images of black churches, colleges and schools, homes and businesses gave black American life a visual reference that rejected dominant narratives of blackness and black people (see figure 2). DuBois set the foundation, establishing alternatives in photographic seeing that engaged with black life in ways that were subversive to the scientific photographs that were being made around the same time. Moving further into the twentieth century, many black photographers would continue to build on this foundation with their own photographic practices.

Photographers such as Roy DeCarava and Gordon Parks worked to produce large archives of images that depicted quotidian black life, including lots of street photography and candid portraiture. These casual and informal images began to diverge from the sociological/scientific perspective, and began to find its place in an artistic context. The most famous works of both DeCarava and Parks were praised for their aesthetic sensibility, such as DeCarava’s The Sweet Flypaper of Life in 1955. The Sweet Flypaper of Life was a collaboration between DeCarava and writer Langston Hughes, in which text written by Hughes corresponds to DeCarava’s images. The book is filled with images that DeCarava took around Harlem, New York, in both public and

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Figure 2. African American family posed for portrait seated on lawn, W. E. B. Du Bois, collector, 1899 or 1900.
private spaces, during the 1940s and 1950s, which Hughes discovered after a chance encounter with DeCarava who happened to be carrying prints with him. DeCarava’s interior images from *Sweet Flypaper of Life* feel most intimate when paired with Hughes’ text, as both the images and text document and imagine the day-to-day experiences of the photographed subjects. One pair of photographs in *Sweet Flypaper of Life* depicts five figures enjoying a party that is taking place in the kitchen of a family’s apartment (see figure 3). Hughes’ text says “and they has a party every Saturday night: usually not no big party: Just neighbors and home folks.” DeCarava's depictions of black life embraced an informality and casual quality that moved away from the rather formal images that filled the Exhibit of American Negroes. The nightlife of black subjects wasn’t of interest to Calloway and to DuBois, who subconsciously limited themselves to daytime photographs and formal portraiture aesthetics. DeCarava’s images move even further away from the scientific images published by various housing associations and government agencies, as he brings his camera into every moment of the quotidian, whether it be an evening party or children playing in sprinklers.

The remaining time on our timeline of photography depicting black life leaves the late twentieth century and twenty-first century, present day. The first significance of our current era can be described as a deeper diversification of the genre, black domestic photography, not only through artists but the kinds of imagery that is being produced. Similar to the work of DeCarava, Carrie Mae Weems, LaToya Ruby Frazier, and Deana Lawson continue the tradition of undoing the erasure of black life but in a way that is reflective of the artists’ current contexts. A significance to their work that separates it from similar work is their emphasis on the domestic space, as it seems to directly speak to the sociological imaginary of black life that Hartman investigated in interior photographs of the early twentieth century. All three photographers have completed
Figure 3. Roy DeCarava, Joe and Julia 1953.
bodies of work that focus on the interior space, and each work uncovers something new about the black domesticity that is specific to a black feminine experience which has not previously been recorded in photographic form.

Before knowing the interiors of Deana Lawson’s 2021 survey publication, I was first engaged with it for its character as an object. The worn brown leather that wrapped around the cover imitated a photograph pressed into the middle of the front cover of a worn brown leather couch seat with a gaping hole in its center (see figure 4). I was engaged in a sensory activity of running my fingers along the cover, feeling the transition between the glossy smooth feel of the photograph to the more matte textured cover material. The transition felt somewhat like an invitation from Lawson, a portal into the realities she documents in a way that transcends the singularity of sight. Her conscious use of the bookform triggered a more conscious awareness of my own possession of it, as the subject of her opening photograph had suddenly materialized in my hands. It wasn’t until I had gotten on the train on my way back upstate that I had begun to enter a Lawson’s visual world within the book’s interior.

As a continuation of my interest in Carrie Mae Weems and LaToya Ruby Frazier’s work with domesticity, the repetitive composition of many of Lawson’s images set within living rooms, bedrooms, and kitchens grabbed my attention. The photographs would often contain one or a pair of black subjects, whose gaze would be concentrated on the camera lens. These were not portraits that got too close to the subjects either, as these compositions often would make sure to frame subject(s) entire bodies, not projecting any emphasis on one’s head over their feet. These ‘zoomed-out’ portraits didn’t just emphasize the physicality of subjects but the details of the spaces that they were represented within, and the photographs alluded to the individuality of each living space just as much as each body. Lawson’s images that describe private space as
Figure 4. Deana Lawson, *Portal*, 2017.
something completely unique seem to confront imagery of black domesticity that is produced to function as iconic representations. None of Lawson’s images in particular were produced with any intention to explain or define black life but when put together in the bookform they begin to lay out collections of experience within sites of home.

In a portrait in Lawson’s book titled *Coulson Family* (2008), a black woman is depicted sitting in a chair with her two sons standing beside her posed rather formally. The two boys are dressed up in collared button-up shirts, black dress pants, and black shoes, and their mother wears matching black dress pants with a navy blouse, and patterned heels. A small Christmas tree with festively wrapped presents underneath sits to the left behind the family of three, towering over the youngest son who is wearing a blue long sleeve dress shirt. The blue on his shirt almost imitates the slightly warmer toned turquoise-blue on the walls of their living room, a paint job which is visibly unfinished as turquoise-blue brushstrokes reveal themselves and begin to fade near their ceiling (see figure 5). Lawson’s large-format composition of the Coulson’s living space gives its subjects lives outside of the context of the photograph, as the organization of the interior creates a sense of past and future. The way the interior appears in the photograph is due to a long chain of past events that we inevitably imagine during the viewing experience. When did the Christmas tree appear and who decorated it? I could imagine the television that sits farthest to the right of the shot turned on with both children sitting in front of it, watching the many DVDs stacked on its sides. The lives of objects within the shot become as relevant as the lives of subjects, and the combination allows viewers to not only enter the subject’s reality but to connect with it as well through shared memories of growing within and maintaining domestic spaces. While we don’t know whether the image is fiction, that the home belongs to subjects not depicted in the image, the specificity of the scene becomes a vessel for a sort of universal memory for many viewers.
Figure 5. Deana Lawson, Coulson Family, 2008.
The unfinished paint on the wall reminded me of a moment from my own childhood when I had asked my mother if I could change the white color of my bedroom walls to a similar turquoise-blue, which eventually turned into a painting project that we completed together. As my own memories can easily merge with the reality of the image, my viewing experience is filled with imaginary scenes of the Coulson family that stem from my own experience.

When asked about the subjects she chooses during a 2019 conversation between Lawson and video artist Authur Jafa, Lawson described a goal of representing her figures “on a transcendental plane.” Lawson says, “I feel like a lot of the figures that I use, I want them to be a pivotal point, or like a vehicle or vessel for something else.” To what extent are Lawson’s photographs about the subjects she photographs? Lawson was born in Rochester, New York, where the Kodak film company’s headquarters are located, in 1979. Lawson described this geographical circumstance as “having a destiny to it.” Lawson’s mother had an administrative role at Kodak for a few decades, causing portrait taking to be a frequent practice for the family. With this early material link to photographic images, specifically the portraits that would sit in family photo albums in their home, Lawson quickly grew critical of the experience a photograph could produce for her. In the same 2019 conversation, Lawson describes an early time in her life at about the age of five when her twin sister Dana broke her thumb while running around the kitchen. After Dana’s treatment her father took a photograph of the two sisters sitting on a stoop next to each other, Deana holding Dana’s cast imitating her pained expression. Lawson said that this image ‘pierced’ her, and described it as “the beginning of identifying with another person, or trying to understand another human being’s pain, in a way, through looking at myself.”

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Lawson maintained her interest in the image, as she studied photography at Pennsylvania State University and at Rhode Island School of Design. It was at RISD that Lawson created an image that marked the genesis of her domestic portraiture style. She posed her mother on two chairs in their living room, and draped her wedding gown over her reclined body. Lawson said “It wasn’t a typical portrait, because my mom had a serious face — there was something a bit unusual". The ‘unusual’ quality speaks of the image’s function of representing her mom with a ‘serious’ expression, in which the image loses the familiar and private feel of the portrait images that decorated family albums in their home. This early domestic portrait from Lawson had been taken with a sense of vaguity in not exactly representing her mother but an idea of her, the wedding dress and the living room chairs as producing an ambiguous narrative. Now, in looking at her completion of a large body of work and her conversation with Jafa perhaps we can begin to answer our initial question: to what extent are Lawson’s photographs about the subjects she photographs? For Lawson, this relationship is rather indirect, and her figures do not represent themselves but a variety of narratives that come from Lawson’s imaginary. While the thought behind this method could be off-putting, whether or not Lawson’s projections may be too untethered to the reality of her subjects, her narratives are often sourced from oral history that is entwined with black tradition in the United States. As a result, Lawsons’ imaginary is in fact tethered to the black experience, making her black subjects ideal bodies to represent the narratives that she has collected. When looking at Lawson’s subjects, we are looking at history and memory re-represented through her black postmodern gaze. In her creative endeavors, Lawson takes on the role of storyteller.

Not only do Lawson’s photographic methods create a sense of history and future through notions of memory and shared experience, but also in the way that she presents her work. An image
titled *Binky & Tony Forever* (2009) depicts a young couple holding each other in a bedroom. The young black man, presumably Tony, sits on the bed while the young black woman, presumably Binky, leans into him while standing, his arms wrapped around her waist and her arms wrapped around his neck (See Figure 6). Even without the interior context I can begin to imagine a history for the pair based on their body language alone, as they’ve clearly been in each other’s arms before. Their familiarity is also expressed through the way that both engage with the camera. Tony’s eyes are closed and his head is lowered in Binky’s arms, he seems to be unaware or uninterested in the camera as all of his senses are engaged with his partner. Tony surrenders himself to Binky, and Binky gives herself to him in return as she presses herself into him. Yet, her attention also lies with us viewers, as her head faces the camera and her gaze makes contact with ours. As our eyes focus on Binky’s and her eyes focus on us, a moment of seemingly mutual seeing occurs that places the photograph in our personal presents. Through an emphasis on the ‘present’ within the photograph and the ‘present’ of the viewing experience, realities within and outside of the photograph begin to overlap. In this portrait and many of Lawson’s others of couples, body language is as immersive as the domestic spaces that her photographs are set in.

The interior only furthers the effects of subjects’ body language, as we can give their intimacy an imagined physical history and context. The couple is seated on a twin-sized bed covered in a shiny gold-tone comforter which stands out from the subdued pastel palette of the rest of the interior. It’s not just the bed’s color that makes it stand out as a subject of the photograph but it’s central position in the image frame as well, and the visual emphasis on the bed is as engaging as Binky and Tony’s presence in the image. The bed itself becomes an active character and relevant part of the relational dynamic between subjects, expanding the ways in which we can enter their
Figure 6. Deana Lawson, Binky & Tony Forever, 2009.
reality. Lawson’s portraits don’t just document relationships between people but also people and objects, allowing for us viewers to engage with the narratives of her subjects more deeply.

The title of the image, Binky & Tony Forever, embraces a combination of her more factual text captions, such as Coulson Family (2008), and others that imbue the images with narratives that extend beyond what is depicted in the photograph. Many of Lawson’s portraits with one subject follow a more strict title form, as she often titles her portraits after subject names, Shirley (2005), Ashanti (2005), Sharon (2007), Thai (2009), Otisha (2013), Shawntel (2016). At times when Lawson breaks the pattern, her titles will include a word or phrase that engages with potential subjects’ realities. A portrait depicts an older woman sitting on a baby blue leather chair in the center of a densely decorated room. The space is filled with paintings, sculptures and extravagantly designed furnishings, such as the overhead crystal chandelier and gold embroidered pouf ottoman to its left, which create a sense of material wealth and extravagance. The extravagance also exists in the woman’s posture as she sits cross-legged with a straight back, one hand placed delicately on her chest and the other on her thigh. Lawson titles this image Diva at 73 Years Old (See Figure 7).

Unlike many other one-person portraits of Lawson’s, we are not given this woman's name, yet our inability to identify the subject doesn’t create any barriers in the viewing experience. As Lawson’s title anchors our attention towards not only to the subject in the image, but a suggested seventy-three year period in which she developed into the present context documented by Lawson’s camera. It also anchors our attention to the objects in the photograph, which were accumulated at some point during the seventy-three year period that the title describes. Lawson’s titles don’t just omit but replace, as the subject is described as “Diva”, which becomes a replacement for a name that is missing. The title here not only privileges an embodiment over
Figure 7. Deana Lawson, Diva at 73 Years Old, 2009.
one of identification, but also begins to blur the boundary between the two. Lawson’s conscious
and careful use of language only enhances the intimate experience of her compositions, as titles
occasionally read as personal anecdotes that, for all we know, subjects could have come up with
themselves. When looking at the young couple holding each other on the twin-sized golden bed
in the previous photograph, the girl’s gaze into the camera almost seems to be whispering Binky
& Tony Forever.

Unlike the strict form that Deana Lawson imposed on her image captions, LaToya Ruby
Frazier’s text and photograph pairings operate oppositionally through a use of image captions
that read like excerpts from a diary. The opening image of Frazier’s book, Notion of Family,
identifies her home, not within a domestic context but on a larger public scale. The image depicts
a road sign that reads “Welcome to Historic Braddock.” ‘Historic’ is written with cursive letters
that emphasize the question of time, as a public home is defined by notions of public history. The
sign continues, and below the initial welcoming message lies an additional message that reads,
“Compliments Of: Air-Scent International; Surco Products; PestCo Inc. Pest Control” (See
Figure 8). Through this underlying message, in a literal and metaphorical sense, a bit of
Braddock’s history is revealed. The bottom of the sign is designed as an abstract silhouette of an
urban skyline, a reference to an idea of Braddock, with various representations of buildings
forming a valley. These buildings appear to be growing like trees from the soil that are three
gimmicky logos representing each business, as they sit below the skyline design. From
Braddock becomes an example of capitalist ideology and Frazier uses her camera to document its
twoness, it being her family’s hometown and an essential site for corporate mass production.
Figure 8. LaToya Ruby Frazier, 2001-2014.
A small body of text on the following page reads; “A historic industrial suburb, Braddock is home to Andrew Carnegie’s first steel mill, the Edgar Thomson Works, which has operated since 1875 and is the last functioning steel mill in the region.” It is accompanied by an image that spans across both pages, a scenic shot of a massive industrial plant situated in between the Monongahela River and a small suburb. Our first picture of Braddock is mostly taken up by clumpy metal structures, railroads, and clouds of mysterious gasses emerging from pipes, as communities and landforms are pushed to the margins of the image frame. Frazier’s landscape shot invokes a feeling of life existing in relation to or in the context of industrialization rather than vice-versa, as Braddock’s timeline starts and ends with the lifespan of Andrew Carnegie’s steel mill (See Figure 9).

In the early pages of Frazier’s work a dichotomy is beginning to emerge between two conflicting sites of home, the public level and the private level. The origins of this dichotomy’s tension in white supremacy and capitalist structure echoes similar tensions described in narratives surrounding the black American experience. One example can be identified in a question W.E.B DuBois asks in his 1903 text, Souls of Black Folk: “Why did God make me an outcast and a stranger in mine own house?” Here, Dubois’ use of the word ‘house’ references an early 20th century United States, which is expressive of the multilayered definition of the term ‘home’. At the first and most private level, a home is a particular private space where one develops and where family is situated. Beyond the sphere of private living space, home expands into the public community, a neighborhood, a town/city, then a state/country, a region of the continent, a continent, and at last the planet. As each location of home imprints itself onto development in

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Figure 9. LaToya Ruby Frazier, 2001-2014.
some way, influencing the formation of an identity, tensions arise when identity derived from public sites of home, continent and country, are in conflict with identity at the private level.

As American culture defines DuBois through his blackness, his masculinity, his potential for profit, etc, he finds himself at an abstract intersection common to those existing along social margins. A tension lies in this intersection, when identity is developed in opposition to locations of home. DuBois writes “One ever feels his twoness , - 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.”

For marginalized bodies the home at the public level becomes a site of contention, in DuBois’ feeling estranged to locations he identifies as home, and Frazier expresses a similar sentiment of a longing for home as well as a tension, both physical and metaphorical. On the eighth page of *Notion of Family* she writes:

> Looking both inwardly and outwardly, I desire to move beyond boundaries. Similar to Annie, Lucy, and Xuela, heroines from a Jamaica Kincaid novel, I am in search of a new space, place, and time. There is a tight pressure and sharp piercing pain in my chest. The lack of deep sleep has not worn off. I feel a sense of imbalance.

This small body of text is accompanied by the first portrait within the book, a self-portrait of Frazier sitting on a bed in a rather visually empty space. Blank white walls and sheets, the frame crops out the lower half of Frazier’s’s body and arms as she sits in the center of the frame (see Figure 10). She sits almost nude, but rejects all themes of voyeurism and passivity. The vacancy of the interior shot, its lack of decor or context, forces spectators to confront Frazier as she is all that is left in the frame. The relationship between her face, her expression, the landscape of her upper body, and the addition of diaristic text functions to represent the ‘imbalance’ between

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Figure 10. LaToya Ruby Frazier, 2001-2014.
home at the most private/intimate level the body, and the hostile structure of her public home. We can imagine the “tight pressure and sharp piercing pain” in Frazier’s chest as we make eye contact with her breasts, and can examine her eyes for the “lack of deep sleep.” The tension is not only verbalized, but is made tangible and physical through the materiality of the photograph. Similar to Lawson’s text and image pairings, Frazier’s text imbues the image with narrative beyond what is depicted in the picture plane, a narrative that echoes its fraternal literary works that describe “twoness” in blackness and the black experience.

Not only does Frazier emphasize a tension in notions of home through text, but also through her photographs which represent her home as a landscape that we can zoom in and out of. On the fifteenth page, we’re zoomed in as viewers are given an invitation into the domestic sphere with an image of her grandmother lighting a cigarette in their living room. The text accompanying this image anchors our attention to the details of the interior: “Grandma’s Ruby’s interior design was a firewall that blocked external forces. She would not be subjugated to a lesser status. [...] The shadow from the steel mill always hovered above us.” Here, home at the private and familial level becomes a site of refuge from the structures of public home, a space ideal for hiding in plain sight, and for shielding oneself from a violent system.

As we scan the interior, we can begin to imagine processes of collecting, placing, decorating, and cleaning involved in interior maintenance, as almost all space is occupied by an object. As dolls sit on the couch, on and in the fireplace, on windowsills, and around the floor corners in the room, the living room takes on the function of a dollhouse (see figure 11). Living within the private space becomes hyperreal, charged by its function as a form of escapism and necessary

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Figure 11. LaToya Ruby Frazier, 2001-2014.
steps in maintaining its ability to protect and shelter. While it is inevitable for aspects of the public to infiltrate the private space, Grandma Ruby uses decoration to privatize the space in a way that rejects aspects of the public. Only those who move within the space can understand the dolls, carpets, and blankets, creating a partition between their private world and public. However, the public can enter private homes through other means: through the television, the phone, as well as through books. It can enter through people who visit, and the way the space is constructed to occupy visitors. The inescapability of public structure is expressed in Frazier’s description of it as a ‘shadow’ that is always ‘hovering above’.

After an initial splitting of home between the public and private realms, Frazier furthers the splicing within her private home. In various photographs throughout the book Frazier uses the visual structure of her home to frame and perhaps define those who appear within her photographs. One of her images is split into a diptych as the camera sits at the end of a hallway in front of two open doors with a wall between them. The wall, which we often experience as invisible while walking through interior spaces, takes up the bulk of the picture frame. Pushed off to the side are two narrow frames of light that appear as portals, hinting towards another space that us viewers can’t fully see or enter. Inside each smaller frame is a figure lying on a bed, one of the figures is Frazier and the other whose back is turned to us can be assumed to be her mother. Two portals that we cannot enter, and two bedrooms that cannot fully visually experience (see figure 12). As we dive into the private sphere we find that some sections are closed off, in which the living room could be consumed with great detail but the bedrooms are not for us to participate in. Frazier’s use of the interior continues to fragment notions of home into different sections and further subsections. This division in access isn’t just experienced by us viewers, but is also reconstructed by the two subjects in the photograph, Frazier and her mother.
Figure 12. LaToya Ruby Frazier, 2001-2014.

Figure 13. LaToya Ruby Frazier, 2001-2014.
Frazier created many portraits of her with her mother, in which they echoed, duplicated, shadowed, and reflected each other (see figure 13). Frazier’s methods of representing herself in relation to her mother and grandmother often produce a sense of the three being one interconnected force. However, the physical fragmentation of their home functions as a reminder that the three are independent and autonomous, despite their maternal linkage. Here, their family is dissected by the spatiality of the interior shot, as Frazier and her mother are removed from each other and relocated in the depths of their own personal privacy.

Interior shots like these only take up a fraction of Frazier’s visual oeuvre in Notion of Family, as she moves between public and private—landscape, still life, and portraiture—resulting in depictions of domesticity that makes us hyper aware of their exclusivity. With every change of scale in Notion of Family—moving from images of Frazier and her mother in their bedrooms to landscape shots of the Monongahela River and the abandoned steel-mill that could’ve been taken with drones—viewers are forced to engage with Frazier’s home on different terms. Each photograph, whether it be situated in a public or private context, redefines home in varying ways. Carrie Mae Weems’ photographs in Kitchen Table Series work similarly, as she uses the camera to define and redefine home. Rather than using scale to identify the different ways in which home can be defined, Weems uses her staged scenes to recontextualize home. It is a place for lovers, a place for friends, for children, and for oneself. Unlike Frazier, the scale that home takes on in Kitchen Table Series is fixed to the dining room context, as all of Weems’ images are framed from the end of her kitchen table. Weems’ focus on the kitchen table, not only as a piece of furniture but as a focal point of the private sphere, makes her own presence and position in each photograph the biggest signifier of how home is being referenced and defined.
Weems understands that “spaces are very unique. Not every space can provide you with the richness of the subject that you need or the background, the ambience, the feeling, the mystery. Places, spaces really carry weight with them.” This thought from a conversation between her and writer Kimberly Drew, speaks to Weems’ use of one repeated space in her seminal 1990 body of photographs titled *Kitchen Table Series*. The project includes twenty self-portraits, each framed almost identically to one another. The camera sits at the end of the kitchen table, contributing to an immersive perspective where viewers feel as if they were sharing the table with Weems. Many of the images in *Kitchen Table Series* feel like confrontations, with the viewer sitting at one end of the table and Weems sitting at the other under the intense overhead light that sits at the top of the frame. The light and the table are the only two consistent factors in the series, as subjects and props disappear, reappear, and move throughout the frame of the photograph. The subjects include Weems, who is present in each photograph, and the rest are subject to inference. Other present players include a young man who appears to be her partner, a young child who appears to be a daughter, as well as other children who may be the daughter’s friends, others Weems’ age who seem to be friends, and some who are not defined at all. The lack of definition is a key part of the photographs in this series, as viewers are left to interpret each subject with context clues from the interior. Weems' consistent deployment of different props and decor become our only means of differentiating her images, as well as developing an understanding of relationships and roles. The visual repetition of the same shot of the kitchen table primes us to be more aware when the scene shifts - we pay more attention when Weems goes from sitting to standing at the other end of the table, when she goes from reading a book to

looking in a mirror- and these objects take on the function of indicators to the roles and significances of subjects.

In one portrait, *Untitled (Man Smoking)*, Weems sits in her usual seat of choice at the end of the table, facing the camera lens head on, while playing cards with a man positioned perpendicular to her on the table’s right side. Weems and this male figure gaze at each other in a way that feels rather restrained. Both of them hold their hands over the bottom halves of their faces, him holding a cigarette to his mouth and her resting her hand against her face, as to conceal a smile or frown. In their attempts not to reveal their hands, all we are given are their eyes, and because Weems’ framing only shows us the left side of the male figure, only Weems’ eyes are legible. Weems’ gaze is skeptical and interrogatory but not harsh, and the interior space is telling of their familiarity with one another. But before we discuss the significance of the interior’s arrangement in this shot, we’ll examine another image from *Kitchen Table Series* that is indicative of how props and decor function in Weems’ compositions. This time Weems sits on the table’s left side, with a different male figure sitting in Weems’ usual choice, the seat at the end of the table. In this untitled photograph neither subject interacts with the other, as the man’s gaze is locked onto his newspaper and Weems’ is looking down, in a rather pensive manner, towards the table. One of the man’s hands is holding the newspaper while the other is pressed against the side of his face, he seems tired. The interior shot is almost vacant, as nothing sits on the walls. The only objects on the table are two glasses of water, both half full, a glass ashtray, and a pack of cigarettes (See figure 14). Suddenly Weems’ kitchen table feels sterile and akin to Brian O’Doherty’s 1986 description of the gallery space, “some of the sanctity of the church, the formality of the courtroom, the mystique of the experimental laboratory”, where bodies are only partially
Figure 14. Carrie Mae Weems, Untitled, Kitchen Table Series, 1990.
welcome\textsuperscript{16}. From the left-side seat the light hits Weems’ face directly, expressing a drama within the high contrast light and shadow on her profile. It is a very classic pensive shot, as her gaze is turned downwards and she’s smoking a cigarette under the bright overhead light. The sense of vacancy is emphasized by the lack of smoke that fills the interior despite Weems’ lit cigarette, and with the air’s stillness their silence seems visualized. This is a first striking difference between the two images, as the previous kitchen table shot is filled with smoky air from the other man’s cigarette.

In revisiting the previous image, the abundance of objects and decor contribute to a completely different feeling (see figure 15). On the back wall behind Weems sits a poster of Malcolm X with his hand raised into a fist, charging the atmosphere not only with the passionate and determined energy of the Civil Rights Movement, but with a contextual history that references a world outside of Weems’ kitchen table. Unlike the sterile image where time seemed to stand still, the arrangement of the interior shot here seems to be constructed with an intent to establish a sort of timeline. There are nine smaller prints that surround the larger poster, their contents illegible to us, which we can imagine Weems’ collecting and decorating her space similarly to Frazier’s Grandma Ruby and Lawson’s Coulson Family in their living rooms. Unlike the two half full cups in the sterile image, the two cups on this table are empty, leaving the viewer to imagine how long ago their contents were finished. In between the two empty cups sits a bowl of peanuts, and next to the man’s empty cup lies a pile of empty peanut shells. Again, the main events of this scene have already occurred, the bottle of liquor is half full, their cups are empty, the peanuts have been deshelled, and smoke has clouded the room. What we get is the aftermath, an identifiable conclusion in both subjects’ body language. The way that Weems slouches back in

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Figure 15. Carrie Mae Weems, Untitled (Man Smoking), Kitchen Table Series, 1990.
her chair, relaxed but still aware of his gaze, as the male figure sits upright with his attention latched onto her. The conclusion is their relationship, as it is the only event still unfolding in the scene (an ongoing event as long as he is still present).

In *Kitchen Table Series*, Weems’ interior does not just provide its subjects with a setting but establishes a timeline for the different sorts of relationships Weems depicts. This is evident not only in these two images, but the entirety of *Kitchen Table Series*, as the repetition of certain props corresponds to the repetition of certain behaviors with different individuals and within different relationships. Glasses are often half full in moments of silence, food only appears on the table in moments of leisure, and some wall hangings are only present with certain subjects. Through meticulous use of her staged interior shot, Weems maps out an autobiographical landscape of social experience in domesticity, which is specifically defined through the various roles ranging from mother, friend, lover, and so on, that all cohere into a singular identity.

The use of the interior shot in representing a black quotidien has historically been loaded with not only developing an image of black life, but with identifying locations of home for black peoples whose geographic presence in the Americas was a product of colonial capture and relocation. This desire for visual redefinition can be identified in DuBois’ curation of images from the late nineteenth century that redefine black life for what was then an emerging generation of legally ‘liberated’ black Americans (epistemlogically similar to Alain Locke’s later differentiation between what he defined as the “New Negro” in comparison to the no longer relevant ‘Old Negro’ in 1925\(^{17}\)). For this reason, visual depictions of black domesticity fall within a heritage of defining and redefining what ‘home’ is for black Americans. Weems, Frazier, and Lawson’s use of the interior shot are continuations of this practice of re-identifying

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\(^{17}\) Alain Locke, “Enter the New Negro,” *Survey Graphic* 6 (March 1925), pp. 631–34.
home, in a way that doesn’t just identify home but its contradictions, complexities, and tensions as well. Their work is especially significant in that the three artists are locating home for black people within new parameters, applying their own experiences of black womanhood to their autobiographical use of the camera to re-identify ‘home’ for black Americans through a critical and modern specificity.
CHAPTER TWO

RELATIONS

The interiors of Lawson, Weems and Frazier act as containers for domestic relationships, and often center their representations of family structure around maternal connection more so than paternal connection. We see this in Lawson’s image of a mother and her sons in *Coulson Family* (and in her use of her mother as a subject for one of her earliest portrait works while in school), images of Frazier’s grandmother and mother, and in Weems’ rather small cast of characters that includes a young girl to play the role of daughter in *Kitchen Table Series*. This interest in maternal connection, specifically relationships between mothers and daughters rather than mothers and sons, is not random but responds to Western cultural associations between black women and motherhood. Writer and feminist Michelle Wallace investigates this association, and others that contribute to it, in her late 1970s text, *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman*, as the second section of her book, “Myth of the Superwoman”, examines the social, historical, and cultural position of black women in patriarchal and anti-black America. Wallace’s use of the word ‘myth’ implies that her text is demystifying ideological projections black women have accumulated throughout colonial history in the Western world, and by doing so, Wallace identifies the fallacies that surround black womanhood so that she can deconstruct them and locate their ideological roots. Wallace writes:

“From the intricate web of mythology which surrounds the black woman, a fundamental image emerges. It is of a woman of inordinate strength, with an ability for tolerating an unusual amount of misery and heavy, distasteful work. This woman does not have the same fears, weaknesses, and insecurities as other women, but believes herself to be and is, in fact, stronger emotionally than most men. Less of a woman in that she is less ‘feminine’ and helpless, she is more of a woman in that she is the embodiment of Mother Earth, the quintessential mother with infinite sexual, life-giving, and nurturing reserves. In other words, she is a superwoman.”

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Wallace’s definition of ‘superwoman’ is less concerned with Eurocentric definitions of femininity, and instead speaks to womanhood in a more objective sense that emphasizes motherhood. Wallace uses ‘Superwoman’ as synonymous with ‘quintessential mother’, as a means of summarizing ideological tropes that surround black women. Wallace demystifies several classic stereotypes of black women in this excerpt. She tackles the ‘black women as undesirably masculine’ trope as she identifies that our alleged superior strength (‘stronger emotionally than most men’) plays into an image of the ‘quintessential mother’. The ‘black women as more sexually promiscuous’ trope is tackled as well, as Wallace ties ‘infinite sexual, life-giving, and nurturing reserves’ to the necessary traits of the ‘quintessential mother’. As black women become cultural icons for motherhood, black daughters often find themselves at a unique intersection, similar to Dubois’ description of double consciousness, as they are subsumed into a social identity of ‘quintessential mother’. As a result, black daughters and black mothers share a kind of sameness of carrying the title of ‘superwoman’ despite being in opposition to each other, one being the care-taker and the other being cared for. This contradictory position gives rise to tensions in relationships between black mothers and daughters, in which black mothers are tasked with raising ‘superwomen’, daughters who will eventually be able to fulfill the role of ‘quintessential mother’. It is evident that such a task alone would be taxing, but the weight of the black mother’s position is even more burdensome as she knows what’s in store for her daughter more than anyone else does. A black mother raising a black daughter can prophesize what life may look like for her daughter in twenty years, but such sight encourages worry and even obsession.
LaToya Ruby Frazier describes her work as “autobiographical and semi-autobiographical”\(^\text{19}\), as the portraits that fill *Notion of Family* all tie back to the artist’s own history of social experience, specifically her family. When asked by photographer Dawoud Bey about her intentions of how her work might engage with viewers, Frazier described how her mother was interwoven in her artistic process: “the portraits *Huxtables, Mom and Me and Momme (Shadow)* were shot by my mother, not me. She is fully aware of capturing our relationship together”\(^\text{20}\) (see figure.13). This sense of sameness is significant in Frazier’s methodology, which subverts traditional aspects of image-making where roles of ‘photographer’ and ‘sitter’ are fixed and in opposition. She understands that in order to photograph the relationship between herself and her mother, her mother’s images of her are just as significant as her images of her mother, as both of them actively define their relationship to one another. As a result, it can be unclear when a portrait was taken by Frazier and when one was taken by her mother, which scholar Laura Wexler coins as a “notion of photography as well as of family.”\(^\text{21}\) Frazier’s methods not only subvert notions of authorship and subject, making her work an investigation of her medium and its traditional limitations as well. In this chapter, we will move from examining the spaces that contain the subjects of Frazier, Lawson, and Weems and into the subjects themselves. Out of the three, Frazier’s visual representations of her and her mother explore their relationship with certain specificity, similarly to the specificity of Lawson’s interiors, that allows for viewers to experience their relationship first-hand, like a primary source of their intimacy.

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\(^{19}\) “Q&A With LaToya Ruby Frazier and Gregory Crewdson - YouTube,” accessed April 11, 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w-vGF8QezKw.


Many of the portraits in *Notion of Family* of Frazier and her mother follow a visual theme of their sameness. One of the more well-known images from this series follows this same pattern but goes even further into abstraction, as two halves of Frazier and her mother’s face are merged into one (see Figure. 16). This image, and many others like it from the book, insist on a visual balance in which she and her mother are not in opposition to each other but instead find a balance within the composition. Frazier’s mother is closest to the front of the picture plane here, and we are given a rather flattened half of her face, her profile. Frazier is facing the camera head on, yet is once again positioned behind her mother and underneath her, cutting off the left side of her face. While Frazier’s eyes are open, her mother’s eyes are closed. Their faces almost perfectly align with one another, as their mouths and noses appear to merge into one. This visual balance between them expresses an innate quality of mother/daughter relationships in which the roles of daughter and mother are parallel, as a mother raises her daughter in her own image and a daughter fashions herself in her mother’s image. At the same time, a mother is still always a daughter and a daughter may very well become a mother or something parallel to a mother (an older sister, an aunt, a wife even), as time is the only determinant of the relevance of each role. This fluidity in position of mother and daughter is mirrored by Frazier’s emphasis on flexibility in the roles of photographer and sitter, as it is rather unclear if her mother set up this shot or if Frazier did it herself. The only visual tension in the balance between the two of them is that Frazier is more often positioned behind her mother. The two insist on a chronological order, in which her mother came first and then Frazier as a product of her mother. In their portraits together, the two of them acknowledge the structure that time has imposed on their relationship as her mom dominates the composition more often throughout *Notion of Family* than Frazier does.
Figure 16. LaToya Ruby Frazier, 2001-2014.
There are several instances throughout *Notion of Family* where Frazier uses a grid of images that read similarly to video stills, ranging from four to nine photographs to represent a scene. The intention of these image grids is to express movement and change, as the images in these grids are often repetitive, using the same vantage point and a relatively similar composition, similar to the repetition in Weems’ *Kitchen Table Series*. Near the end of the book, Frazier adds one last of these image grids that contains nine images of her and her mother. In each of these nine photographs, Frazier and her mother are silhouetted, as they are positioned behind a semi-translucent bed sheet ornamented with a vegetal design and subtle images of birds scattered throughout. Despite Frazier and her mother being obscured behind this bedsheet, their bodies still feel familiar to us viewers who, at this point, have experienced nearly a hundred intimate images of the two of them (see figure 17).

In reading the grid from right to left, the page begins with Frazier’s silhouette sitting on a surface that is indiscernible to us. Suddenly one figure becomes two, as a standing figure enters the picture plane, but it slowly becomes difficult to tell which one is Frazier and which one is her mother. Slowly, the two figures begin to move away from the center of the composition, and in a photograph placed directly in the center of the grid, we see two outstretched arms reaching towards the composition’s center. As we are only given their arms, it becomes nearly impossible to tell which is which, emphasizing a sense of sameness between Frazier and her mother. This sense of Frazier and her mother as equal and interchangeable is furthered by their shared position behind the bed sheet, as they are equally silhouetted and obscured. As we continue to read right to left from the center image, we are first given two clear silhouettes of Frazier who is standing and then two images of her mother, also standing, but in different positions.
Figure 17. LaToya Ruby Frazier, 2001-2014.
The way that Frazier and her mother engage with the bedsheets positioned in front of them becomes more evident as well, as their outstretched arms seem to be positioned in relation to the icons of birds that are dispersed throughout the textile’s design. The sitting figure reaches out with one arm so that one of the birds appears to be sitting on her hand. The standing figure begins to mimic this gesture towards the bedsheets, and engages with the birds similarly. In this moment of imitation, the identities of each figure become less obscured. This moment of imitation referenced previous images of Frazier and her mother in *Notion of Family*, when Frazier represented herself as imitating her mother, who always comes first. Following these visual themes in Frazier’s representations of her and her mother, we can assume that the standing figure is Frazier and that the sitting figure is her mother. In beginning with a clear silhouette of Frazier and ending with a clear silhouette of her mother, we assume that somewhere along the way one became the other. The central image becomes the pivot of this transformation, as we are given two hands attempting to synchronize with each other, and do so rather successfully as we can only hypothesize whose arm belongs to whom. At the same time, their sameness falls short, as these images still emphasize that Frazier is a product of her mother. Frazier’s silhouette can become her mother’s but not the other way around. It is in this difference that tension arises, as the final presence of Frazier is only a result of the negation of her mother. Here, daughters don’t just become their mothers but take up the position entirely, and black mothers are eventually lost in their daughter’s development.

Representations of mother and daughter relationships that use similar visual themes of imitation and synchronicity can also be identified in Carrie Mae Weems’ images in *Kitchen Table Series*. In *Untitled (Woman and Daughter with Makeup)*, Weems sits at the head of the table, facing the camera directly, but is occupied by the action of applying makeup to her face (See figure 18).
Figure 18. Carrie Mae Weems, Untitled (Woman and Daughter), Kitchen Table Series, 1990.
Her gaze is locked into the makeup mirror that sits on the table in front of her, besides a couple more products that she has or has yet to apply. A younger girl, the ‘daughter’, sits perpendicularly to Weems on the right side of the kitchen table, and appears to be mimicking Weems. The daughter’s mirror is slightly smaller and only one other product sits on the table in front of her. The balance in this mother/daughter portrait lies in their synchronization, as both Weems and the daughter are looking into their round small mirrors, using one hand to apply product to their lips while the other rests on the kitchen table. Similarly to the visual insistence of a chronological order in the images of Frazier and her mother, Weems does the same in this image. Unlike Weems’ makeup collection and mirror, the collection of the daughter is still developing as she only possesses two products, exactly half of Weems’ four products. Additionally, the smaller mirror implies that the daughter is not yet able to use the larger mirror that Weems uses, but that she’ll eventually develop into a mirror of that size. Eventually the daughter will become her mother but for now she remains a still-developing daughter, and the composition emphasizes this fact.

Lawson identifies a similar contradictory position of daughters as ‘developing mothers’ or ‘mothers in progress’ in her presentations but, unlike the images of Frazier and her mother and the ones from *Kitchen Table Series*, neither Lawson or her mother make appearances in any of her images. Lawson’s mother/daughter portraits are instead made of cultural projections of notions surrounding a kind of relationship, rather than autobiographical documentation of her own experience in such relationships. One method is not more effective than the other, as both provide us insight to ideological and cultural organization of mother/daughter relationships, and all three artists converge on similar themes in their representations. In *Wanda and Daughters* (2009), Lawson moves beyond the interior space for a lush and green exterior backdrop, as three
figures stand in front of a dense wall of ivy vines that clump together into tangles of green stems on the ground (see figure 19). The three figures, Wanda and her two daughters, stand next to each other in height and age order, with Wanda furthest to the left of the picture and her youngest daughter furthest to the right. Her youngest daughter leans on her eldest daughter, the eldest daughter leans on her mother, and Wanda leans on a tree that is slightly cropped out of the composition. Lawson’s representation of Wanda and her daughters also insists on a chronological order, that, unlike Frazier and Weems, goes beyond the three figures and into the entire environment represented in the image. The oldest in this image is not Wanda but the tree that she leans on, and by cropping the tree Lawson suggests that the cycle continues beyond the image frame, representing a mother and daughter connection as cyclically infinite. Similarly to Weems’ representations of mother and daughter, Wanda and her daughters are synchronized as all three lean towards the left while gazing into the camera, with their left hand resting on the subject next to them. The balance in this image is literal, as each figure balances their body onto the one to their left. The sense that the daughters are still developing is present in this image through their facial expressions. The youngest and her limited life experience contributes to the large smile on her face, as her unfiltered excitement to be photographed by Lawson expresses a certain naivety that is not shared by the eldest daughter. The rather blank stare of the eldest daughter shows a bit more self-consciousness and a developing sense of self-awareness, as she intentionally removes any visual cues of her emotional state. Unlike the youngest, the eldest daughter has begun to notice her mother and imitate her, as her mother wears a similar neutral expression. Still, Wanda came first and then her daughters, and Lawson acknowledges this chronological order while still representing mothers and daughters as imitations of each other.
Figure 19. Deana Lawson, Wanda and Daughters, 2009.
For Lawson’s *Wanda and Daughters*, their facial expressions took an additional step to call attention to perspective as a significant distinguishing between mother and daughter despite their sameness. Inevitable differences in perspective was a significant theme in Wallace’s “Myth of the Superwoman”, as she spends the first chapter of this section recalling her relationship with her mother. Wallace writes that their relationship was rather complicated, as eventually the lack of trust between Wallace and her mother led them to both agree for Wallace to “enter a Catholic Home called Sisters of the Good Shepherd Residence” at seventeen, as a means of taking “radical action”. By the time that Wallace writes this text, there seems to be a bit of resolution in her understanding of her mother, as she says: “I [at the time] was in no way prepared to understand what my mother was going through”. In Wallace’s later reflections of her mother’s perspective, she writes: “She had protected me and tried to render my childhood one extended fairytale of security, comfort, and happiness, and I had let her down.” Wallace now interprets her mother’s controlling quality as her having to overcompensate in her protection of her daughter from impoverishment, as, at the time, Wallace naively felt that “there was an impenetrable wall between me and anything like poverty and suffering”. This overcompensation on the part of Wallace’s mother tells us that the ‘quintessential mother’ position is not just something projected onto black women, but often is a necessary aspect of black motherhood. The emotional strength of these ‘quintessential mothers, which Wallace describes as ‘stronger than most men’, is a necessity in protecting black daughters from the violent and destructive qualities of anti-black capitalism and patriarchy.

Frazier expresses a similar sense of overcompensation in motherhood, but on the part of her grandmother rather than her mother. Frazier was born in 1982, and spent her childhood with her

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mother in their increasingly vacant community in Pennsylvania. When Frazier reached sixteen years old, her mother sent her to live with her grandmother, Ruby Virginia Davis Frazier, who appears in the text captions of Notion of Family as “Grandma Ruby”. It was around the same time that she began using photography as a means to document life in Braddock, as she used a disposable camera to take pictures of classmates that rode on her bus during her senior year of highschool. Frazier then began to study photography and graphic design at Edinboro University of Pennsylvania, where she met Kathe Kowalski who Frazier describes as her “first photographic mentor”. One day in a class with Kowalski, Frazier encountered Dorothea Lange’s Migrant Mother, which made Frazier “question the importance of who has the power to author subjectivity”. In an interview from Notion of Family, Frazier says: “I began making portraits with my mother and my grandmother by asking myself this question: if Florence Thompson - the woman in Migrant Mother - made self-portraits of herself and her family’s condition, what would her images look like?”23 A lot of the images in Notion of Family, which Frazier began during her undergraduate studies, were made in response to this question, in which Frazier was interested in the significance of her authorship over recording her family and community. Frazier began to make many images of her grandmother in her home, as her grandmother’s home was a private sphere within their community that was fundamental to Frazier’s experience in Braddock.

One image from 2005 of Frazier and her grandmother, titled Grandma Ruby and Me, is set in her grandmother’s living room which is identifiable to us through the many dolls that decorate the interior. In Grandma Ruby and Me, Frazier and her grandmother sit on the floor next to each other (see figure 20). Again, they appear synchronized, they both sit with one arm on the floor

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Figure 20. LaToya Ruby Frazier, 2001-2014.
and one rested on their body in an almost odalisque pose that is more upright than reclined, with their heads turned back towards the camera. Frazier examines the significance of the dolls for her grandmother on the following page, as she recalls how her grandmother’s enjoyment of them and her often overlapped:

“These are my children, my babies,” she would say as she groomed them and chain-smoked Pall Malls. I too became part of her collection. She adorned me. I was a porcelain doll she kept locked away in a glass case until she decided to take me out and exhibit me. ‘You are one of my dolls. I dressed you like a baby doll because I wanted to. Everybody saw you, You were sooo cute.’ [...] When I outgrew Grandma Ruby’s dresses she would always say, ‘I want to smash you back into a little doll.”

Perhaps Frazier’s reflections on her grandmother’s objectification of her is similar to Wallace’s, in the sense that she is speaking of her grandmother’s perspective from a new place of understanding. Frazier’s grandmother’s desire to “smash [her] back into a little doll” parallels Wallace’s mother’s controlling qualities, as both shared a desire to stop their daughters from developing into them, into mothers. Grandma Ruby’s attempts to halt Frazier’s development by making her part of her private, highly controlled space (referring back to the previous chapter), a part of her doll collection that is safe from the violent public structure that surrounds them. The extremity of Grandma Ruby’s desire to make Frazier’s position as daughter a permanent one is evident in her language, as her desire to “smash” Frazier expresses an application of force that is maybe harmful or even violent. Wallace’s mother took a similar approach in sending her daughter to a highly secured private sphere, a Catholic Home, where Wallace would similarly be sheltered from a public system. The visual theme of ‘still-developing’ daughter that we saw in Wanda and Daughters from Lawson and Untitled (Woman and Daughter with Makeup) from Weems, does not only express maternal connection, but also a certain anxiety that burdens black

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mothers. It’s impossible to stop your daughter from aging and eventually experiencing the world in its wholeness, and these anxieties are embedded in the images of these three artists.

Sadiya Hartman touches upon these anxieties in *Wayward Lives Beautiful Experiments* as she closes out the first section of her book, “She Makes an Errant Path Through the City”. Only about two pages long and titled “In a Moment of Tenderness the Future Seems Possible”, Hartmann concludes with a melancholy reflection of the difficulty that is sustaining black love in an American capitalist context. In this section, Hartman speaks from the perspective of a female lover in a heterosexual relationship, and inevitably in writing from the perspective of a daughter, the mother becomes equally as relevant:

“The right couple exists in a state of peril. The future promised by the marriage plot will be derailed when the mother asks, “What that niggah got to marry on?” It is the question on which black marriage founders. [...] All the maternal toil and sacrifice fail to assure any better prospects for her daughter or provide an escape from the unspeakable. For this too the black mother will shoulder the blame. She has given all she has, all that matters, but no avail. A vague disquieting feeling hangs in the air. It will cost her and the daughter everything.”

In revisiting Grandma Ruby’s use of material objects to square off her space from the hostility of the public world that surrounded her and her family, it becomes evident Hartman’s reflections on a mother’s need to secure financial stability for her daughter comes from the same place. Even though daughters cannot be prevented from developing into mothers, as age and the things that come with it are inevitable, a mother can hope to compensate, financially and materially in this case, enough so that the daughter can avoid taking on the role of ‘superwoman’ in its entirety. This idea that wealth can deter the weight that is being a ‘superwoman’, is known only to the mother, who, Hartman emphasizes, is first to ask a question that feels devastating to a young couple experiencing a rose-tinted love, “what that niggah got to marry on?” At the same time,

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this devastating blow is inevitable, a conversation that will happen one way or another, and is actually a signifier of the seriousness of the relationship, a ‘right couple’.

Perhaps this means that the relationship that plays out in *Kitchen Table Series*, represented the ‘wrong couple’, as this inevitable conversation proved to be destructive for the relationship between Weems and the anonymous male character. Weems completed fourteen square silk-screened text panels, which read similarly to Frazier’s diaristic text, to accompany her twenty photographs in the series. In one of them Weems says: “He felt her demands for more than he could presently give would cause her to lose a good thing. She felt her lack of compromise around her simple needs would soon have her singing.” In continuing, the text turns into lyrics of a song from Nina Simone’s “I Loves You Porgy”, originally a duet from the opera, *Porgy and Bess*, in which Bess is pleading to her lover, Porgy, to protect her from her abusive partner. Upon having ‘the conversation’ Weems’ character worries that she will soon find her Porgy, someone who could fulfill her more successfully than her current partner is able, someone who has *something* to ‘marry on’.

The story continues in Weems’ text panels, as Weems’ character goes to her mother (the same as Hartman in the relevance of a mother in a daughter’s narrative) for relationship advice, who says: “But look, ya got a good man, man puts up with mo a yo mess than the law allows. If he loves ya, ya best take yo behind home, drop them guns on the floor and work it out. Ya gotta give a little to get a little, that’s the story of life.” If ‘yo mess’ refers to Weems’ expectations for her partner, her mother seems to express a certain gratitude towards her male partner for sticking

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with her despite her seemingly insatiable desires. The ‘if he loves ya’ feels synonymous with ‘if he wants ya’, as the mother character understands the perspective of the male partner in the relationship to be more significant than the perspective of Weems’ character. ‘Loves’ could maybe even be swapped out with ‘takes’, “if he [takes] ya, ya best take yo behind home, drop them guns on the floor and work it out.” The mother’s anxiety about Weems’ character losing this man suggests a fear that she might not find another. Similarly to Grandma Ruby’s dolls, Wallace’s exile to a Catholic home by her mother and Hartman’s narrative of a mother’s need to ‘assure any better prospects for her daughter”. Weems’ imaginary mother hopes to save her daughter through her marriage to a man. However, according to Hartman, if the “maternal toil and sacrifice” needed to save a daughter isn’t enough, “it will cost [the mother] and the daughter everything.” This is inevitably true in Frazier’s case, as her grandmother’s labor could not protect her or her mother’s body from the toxic post-industrial landscape that they live within.

In Notion of Family, Frazier chronicles the life of her grandmother, as her diaristic image captions often references Grandma Ruby’s experiences in motherhood, and her journalistic photographic practice visually captures her grandmother’s elderly years, all the way up to her death in UPMC Braddock Hospital on January 18th, 2009. One final image of Frazier’s grandmother captures her funeral, in which Grandma Ruby’s body is presented in an open casket with porcelain dolls and framed images of her, taken by Frazier, decorated around the space (see figure. 21). Grandma Ruby’s casket is framed in the center of the composition. At first glance this image seems to disregard a previous visual pattern where Frazier’s mother was always emphasized in the composition more than Frazier, as Frazier is now positioned directly in front of her grandmother’s casket and Frazier’s mom is similarly positioned in the front, but is slightly off to the side. Following patterns previously used, one might assume that Grandma Ruby should
Figure 21. LaToya Ruby Frazier, 2001-2014.
dominate the composition, as both Frazier and her mother are a product of her grandmother, yet Grandma Ruby's body is a minor part of the composition. While Frazier stands in front of her grandmother’s casket, she doesn’t stand in front of her grandmother’s body, as only her top half is visible. Frazier’s mother is positioned similarly, in front of the casket but in relation to Grandma Ruby’s body. Frazier and her mother use their bodies to create another composition within the photograph that frames a visible glimpse of Grandma Ruby in her casket. The shadow of Frazier’s mother, who is standing to Grandma Ruby’s left, falls over Grandma Ruby’s body. As Frazier’s grandmother falls into shadow of Frazier’s mother, similarly to how Frazier had previously, a sense of the three of them being interdependent is emphasized. (in figure 13).

Frazier and her mother continue to mirror each other in this image, and even more so than previously. They stand in the same position, facing each other, wearing black pants and a black top, with their arms resting by their sides. However, Frazier’s mother is positioned slightly nearer to the camera than Frazier is, and she looks towards the ground, while Frazier is positioned closer to her grandmother’s casket and is looking directly into the camera lens. While her mom is positioned slightly in front of her, Frazier still takes control of the shot as she gazes into the camera lens, and despite these small differences the two are represented almost as equals. Despite Grandma Ruby’s body being a minor part of the composition, photographs of her decorate fill the image’s empty space. Two large prints of Grandma Ruby fill the space behind Frazier, as one sits on the floor below her casket and one sits on an easel above her casket. Several smaller images and dolls sit below Grandma Ruby, lining the bottom of her casket, with some dolls placed in the casket around Grandma Ruby’s body (fragments of her private space following her into death). Frazier’s mother stands in front of two large prints of Grandma Ruby that sit on the floor, and the rest of the image’s empty space is filled with various floral
arrangements. In a sense, Grandma Ruby dominates the frame not physically, but in the memories of Frazier and her mother which are materialized through the many photographs that fill the space. This image invokes the same sense that their maternal connection exists beyond a context of life and death that is present in Lawson’s image Wanda and Daughters, as the tree seemed to function as an indicator that the cycle continued beyond Wanda. Grandma Ruby still dominates the composition, despite her life having ended, through means that go beyond her physical presence. For Frazier, maternal connection maintains its order and balance both in life and in death. This final image of her grandmother seems to claim that mothers never die, but rather just become something else so that the torch of motherhood can be passed down to their daughters. “She has given all she has, all that matters, but no avail”, ‘no avail’ referring to the development that plagues daughters who will continue in their mother’s footsteps, and that through this cycle mothers become immortalized. While the immortalization of the black maternal figure is partly a product of oppression– an exploitative emphasis on her position as a source of economic value that reproduces itself– this immortalization can take on new significance in culture, relationships, and experiences. For Lawson, Weems, and Frazier, this immortalization of mothers in their daughters and granddaughters affects the way that the three artists see themselves and influences their art-making as a result.

This large cumulation of complex images of mothers and daughters from Lawson, Weems, and Frazier beg the question, are paternal relations, those between fathers and daughters or fathers and sons, less significant in the gazes of the three artists, and why is that so? Perhaps it is because the three artists identify as black women themselves, inspiring their creative interests in representing black womanhood, which, in Wallace’s definition, is almost equivalent with notions of motherhood. Out of the three, Lawson often represents paternal relations, fathers and sons
more so than fathers and daughters, in images such as *Sons of Cush* (2016) (see figure 22), which depicts a man holding his infant son. At the same time, Lawson’s oeuvre captures modern black life in various spheres that extend beyond domestic and familial contexts. Weems and Frazier move away from representing paternal connection, as their work is less general. It instead embraces a certain autobiographical specificity that sources their own experiences as black women, as Frazier documents her context in real time and Weem reconstructs her context on stages.

Figure 22. Deana Lawson, Sons of Cush, 2016.
CHAPTER THREE

SELF

This creative interest in representing mothers and daughters speaks to the three artists' own unique experiences, beyond their more general social positioning as black women. While Frazier does not have children, her relationship with her mother and her grandmother were very formative for her, and the weight of her position as ‘daughter’ speaks to the perspective she embraces in her images of her mother and grandmother. On the other hand, Lawson had her son around twenty while studying photography at the University of Pennsylvania in which her life is split into two equal parts, the first part being her as a daughter and the second part being her as a mother (Lawson is currently in her early forties.) Weems had her daughter, Faith C. Weems, in 1969 at sixteen years old, and so out of the three the role of mother has played an extremely significant and long term role in Weems' life.

Carrie Mae Weems was born in 1953 in Portland Oregon to her parents, Carrie Polk and Myrlie Weems. It was around the same time when Weems had her daughter that she began to develop an interest in the arts, as she followed creative pursuits in dance and performance between San Francisco and New York. When Weems’ daughter was about three years old, her interests shifted slightly from the arts to politics, as she joined a Marxist organization and actively worked in the labor movement. Soon after shifting her focus, Weems received a camera as a birthday present which would then merge her interests in the arts and in politics within the form of the photograph. The camera seemed to awaken something in Weems, as she would go on to study photography and design at San Francisco City College between 1974 and 1976. By the time she would complete *Kitchen Table Series* in 1990, Weems has spent fifteen years producing

exhibitions focussing on black photographers, researching and speaking with artists (she continued her studies at California Institute of the Arts and University of California, San Diego), and creating several photographic bodies of work such as *Family Pictures and Stories* (1981-1982) and *American Icons* (1988-1989). When *Kitchen Table Series* was circling around various exhibitions and galleries in 1990, from London to Atlanta to Boston, her daughter was nearly twenty-one years old, and so this formative period of Weems’ career was inevitably shaped by an experience of raising her daughter. Due to this, Weems’ interest in representing maternal connection in *Kitchen Table Series* is auto-bigraphical, as her representations of a mother and daughter are grounded in her experiences as a young mother with a daughter. The same could be said for Lawson and Frazier, Lawson also being a mother who creates images of mothers and Frazier being a daughter who creates images of her mother and grandmother.

In an article for *Artsy*, Frazier says that “My grandmother, mother, and I are authoring those images,” which calls into question the extent to which the images in *Notion of Family* are self-portraits. Frazier’s interest in reversing traditional roles of photographer and sitter in her images of her and her mother also calls her authorship of her images into question as well. If her mother sets up the shot, but Frazier releases the shutter, who is the ‘self’ that has taken the portrait? Is it her mother’s self portrait or is it Frazier’s? Similar questions can be asked about *Kitchen Table Series*, whether Weems, who is only playing a character whose alias is ‘Woman’, is representing herself or a certain experience that extends beyond herself. The same goes for Lawson, who rarely represents herself in her images. These three artists also converge in blurring the lines between a ‘self-portrait’ and a ‘portrait’ in which it becomes increasingly difficult to

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understand how self is represented in their images. In this chapter we will investigate to what extent self is represented in their images, both literally in visual representations and conceptually in considering the artists’ intentions and backgrounds.

Out of the three, *Kitchen Table Series* seems most aligned with a traditional definition of a self-portrait. At the same time, Weems’ character does not take on Weems’ name, yet she also does not take on any alternative title. ‘Woman’ reads as a rather broad category that opens up the character to represent an anonymous subject, specifically an anonymous woman. While anonymity is a tool for negating identity, in which identity becomes removed from the subject, it can also be a means of absorbing identity, as anonymity becomes a non-specific subject whose limits in representation are undefinable. Weems speaks on the function of her anonymous subject that expresses how her images are representations of self:

> I use my own constructed image as a vehicle for questioning ideas about the role of tradition, the nature of family, monogamy, polygamy, relationships between men and women, between women and their children, and between women and other women– underscoring the critical problems and possible resolves.\(^{31}\)

Weems’ images do represent self, yet she negates her own identity so that her image can function as a representational vehicle that speaks to and for viewers who identify with her experience. Lawson says something similar in her conversation with Jafa: “I feel like a lot of the figures that I use, I want them to be a pivotal point, or like a vehicle or vessel for something else.”\(^{32}\) Weem’s use of her own image in *Kitchen Table Series* is aligned with the way that Lawson uses her own subjects, both functioning as representational vehicles. This is one, rather ideological, way that Weems’ images in *Kitchen Table Series* represent self. The other way is a bit more literal, in

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which the anonymous narrative that *Kitchen Table Series* produces is quite aligned with Weems’ actual life.

In reading the images in *Kitchen Table Series* in their proper order, a narrative begins to reveal itself. The series begins with an image of Weems in her usual seat at the head of the kitchen table, gazing directly into the camera lens (see figure. 23). The only props and decor in the interior are placed on the kitchen table, as nothing sits on the walls or around the space. The same makeup mirror that Weems’ uses in *Untitled (Woman and Daughter)*, is placed in the center front of Weems again, but this time she doesn’t appear to be using it. Her right hand sits on the table with a hair brush and comb to its left, and an almost empty glass to its right. On the left side of the table sits a bottle of liquor, a pack of cigarettes, an ashtray, and another almost empty glass. Weems sits with a slight smile and a rather smug expression on her face which seems to be in response to the anonymous male figure who looms over her affectionately. We can infer that the second glass belongs to this male figure, who had just spent some time drinking with Weems. The male figure’s face is covered by his top hat, and his formal attire adds to the sense of his anonymity, an anonymous man or an idea of a ‘quintessential’ man. His hat being on and his embrace to Weems suggest that their time together has come to an end, but not to a permanent end, as is suggested by Weems’ pleased expression.

As the series continues, Weems continues to spend time with this male figure, in images such as *Untitled (Man Smoking)* (see figure. 14) and *Untitled (Man Eating Lobster)* (see figure. 24). Eventually their relationship begins to dwindle, as one of her text panels reads “she felt monogamy had a place but invested it with little value. It was a system based on private property, an order defying human nature. [...] But nonetheless assured him she was secure enough in herself and their love to allow him space to taste the exotic fruits produced in such abundance by
Figure 23. Carrie Mae Weems, Untitled (Man and Mirror), Kitchen Table Series, 1990.
Figure 24. Carrie Mae Weems, Untitled (Man Eating Lobster), Kitchen Table Series, 1990.
mother nature.” Despite her character’s claims that she was invested in her relationship, the images say otherwise as the ‘Woman’ begins to appear rather dissatisfied and melancholy in her images with the male character. This can be identified in another image we previously discussed, in which Weems was sitting in a pensive state under the overhead light while smoking a cigarette (see figure 15). The next image from the series seems to be taken from the same scene, as Weems’ character is wearing the same black robe she was wearing in the previous image, but this time she stands behind the male character, who is sitting at the head of the table, watching over his shoulder with a rather cold demeanor. The next image appears as an inverse of the image we began with as this time Weems is standing over the male figure who is sitting at the table and is hugging him tightly. This is the last time Weems’ character and the male character appear together in the series.

It is significant that the only characters that appear in the rest of the series are two older figures who represent Weems’ friends, one younger figure who represents her daughter, and three younger figures who seem to represent the daughter’s friends. It wasn’t until 1995 that Weems got married to Jeff Hoones, nine years after she met him in 1986 at a Rochester University Visual Studies workshop. We can imagine that during this twenty-six year span of time between the birth of Faith C. Weems in 1969 and Weems' marriage in 1995, Weems’ life was organized by her duties as a single mother. Friends likely were aids to Weems, as most of her work in the seventies and eighties was in organizations, workshops, and other collaborative environments. The solace Weems’ character seems to discover towards the end of the series after various scenes with her friends, seems to reflect on the solace she found in the communities she worked within.

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In a sequence of three images, Weems goes from crying with her friends standing around her, to the three of them sitting rather gloomily and silent as Weems smokes a cigarette, to the three of them laughing and moving so much that they appear as blurred in the photograph (see figures. 25,26,27). We can imagine that the relationships Weems created in community spaces such as Anna Halprin’s San Francisco Dancers Workshop in 1970, provided her with a similar comfort or sense of security, as represented in her photographs, in raising her daughter alone. While the plot of Kitchen Table Series — which begins with the ‘Woman’ in a relationship that promptly ends, her heartbreak, her being comforted by friends and peer, her subsequent time alone with her daughter, and her coming to terms with herself — is meant to represent and investigate notions of gender, race, and sexuality, it is still a body of work that is extremely autobiographical. 1990, the debut year of Kitchen Table Series, was five years before Weems married Hoone. If we imagine her life at that point with her daughter being an adult and out of her guardianship, the final image in the series of Weems’ character playing cards alone at the kitchen table with a box of chocolates and cup of wine feels accurate to her position as a mother, lover, and friend at the time of making the series (see figure 28).

Figures 25, 26, & 27. Carrie Mae Weems, Untitled, Kitchen Table Series, 1990.

Figure 28. Carrie Mae Weems, Untitled, Kitchen Table Series, 1990.
This complex representational method that Weems deploys in her *Kitchen Table Series* photographs speaks to bell hooks’ discussion of the multifacetedness of the black feminine gaze. In a chapter of her book *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, titled “The Oppositional Gaze”, bell hooks breaks down how images of black women speak to black women, specifically images that were recurrent in film and television during the middle and late twentieth century. In investigating how black women engaged with these cinematic representations of their social positionings, bell hooks writes:

> Most of the black women I talked with were adamant that they never went to movies expecting to see compelling representations of black femaleness. They were all acutely aware of cinematic racism and its violent erasure of black womanhood. In Anne Friedberg's essay ‘A Denial of Difference: Theories of Cinematic Identification’ she stresses that ‘identification can only be made through recognition, and all recognition is itself an implicit confirmation of the ideology of the status quo.’

A lack of ‘compelling representations’ is an interesting distinction from a lack of representations in general, as it creates a further distinction between a representation’s image and its substance. If one were to only consider the image of a representation – referring to the presence of a representational subject in media, an image of a black woman in cinema – there would be no real lack as various images of black women are recurrent in American film and television. However, it is the substance of these representations that is lacking, which leads to the ‘violent erasure of black womanhood’. As a result, the ‘identification [that] can only be made through recognition’ applies to both the image and substance of a representation. While black women inevitably find themselves recognizing an image of themselves, and therefore identifying with it, the substance of the representation speaks to something else rooted in white supremacy and patriarchy. Black women spectators exist in a liminal space when encountering representations of themselves, as

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they both recognize and don’t recognize simultaneously. bell hooks’ definition of a critical seeing that arises out of the absence of identification is aligned with DuBois’ description of a double seeing that comes from alienation. Both ideas intersect upon a sense of absence—whether it be a lack of access or a lack of identification— that is the result of racial marginalization, and define a critical ‘second sight’ that comes from such absence.37

This experience of double seeing that black women have when engaging with representations of themselves, is dubbed the “oppositional gaze” by bell hooks, in which “black women were able to critically assess the cinema's construction of white womanhood as object of phallocentric gaze and choose not to identify with either the victim or the perpetrator.” This outsider perspective that comes from the ‘oppositional gaze’ not only affects the way that black women engage with images of themselves but also of others, of men and of non-black people, where the various ways in which identities are ideologically and canonically constructed is more obvious. This outsider gaze lends itself to the development of an epistemological perspective that subverts the ‘objectivity’ of the mainstream. This subversive gaze develops into something else, a ‘counter-memory’, as bell hooks writes: “black women involve ourselves in a process whereby we see our history as counter-memory, using it as a way to know the present and invent the future.”38 Due to the lack of ‘substance’ in representations of black womanhood, substance has to be located elsewhere, and is most often located in memory. As these ‘counter-memories’ allow for black women to define and redefine the substance of their experience that is lacking in mainstream representations, memory and experience become important tools in navigating the present and imagining the future. bell hooks’ phrases ‘to know the present’ and ‘invent the

future’ call into question on what scale are present and future being engaged with by black female spectators.

For Weems, her counter memory is represented in the photographs of *Kitchen Table Series* that archive her experiences in black womanhood as well as in motherhood (specifically the overlap between the two). Weems uses this counter memory in order to ‘know the present’, more so than ‘invent the future’, as her representations subvert simplistic and passive representations of women in domestic contexts. Even Weems’ kitchen setting establishes a new and critical take on “women in the kitchen” which then puts her knowledge of the present on a larger scale, as canonical images of women in the kitchen were meant to objectively represent all women. In the *Kitchen Table Series*, Weems’ ‘knowing the present and inventing the future’ takes on a scale that stretches beyond her personal present but speaks to a community of people who can not only identify with the image of her representations of women but also with their substance. Frazier’s *Notion of Family* operates similarly, as she embraces bell hooks’ description of an ‘oppositional gaze’. Frazier’s oppositional gaze results in *Notion of Family* embracing a similar critical double-seeing, in which her images lie in the middle of representing self with a certain specificity and representing self rather vaguely. During her conversation with Dawoud Bey, Frazier says:

“As the work has grown over the years, I have tried to edit and frame it in ways so that viewers can imagine themselves a part of it. We all come from families and communities that are affected by local economies and industry. Themes like the body and landscape, familial and communal history, and private and public space are all universal. When viewers look into my photographs and texts I want them to feel deeply touched in a way that transcends race, class, and gender, if only for one moment.”

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As Frazier lists the themes that shaped her photographic practice, “body and landscape, familial and communal history, private and public space”, her oppositional gaze manifests in her work similarly to Weems’ as both share a desire to “enter the larger discussions”. Frazier’s intention for viewers to feel “deeply touched” when engaging with her photographs, suggests that her image-making is shaped by this desire for her images to function as broad substantive representations that transcend “race, class, and gender, if only for one moment.” Therefore, Frazier uses an image of herself and her family similarly to how Weems does, as a “representation vehicle”, in which her images represent herself and lives beyond herself simultaneously. As Frazier and Weems produce representations of black womanhood that subvert mainstream representations, new images with unexplored substance, they direct their oppositional gaze towards their own bodies. This critical introspective gaze is the tool that allows them to use their own bodies when creating photographs that function as broad representations.

While *Notion of Family* essentializes Frazier into a victim of post-industrialization, capitalism, and poverty, a circumstance that is not unique to her, it simultaneously presents the specificity of her relationship with her grandmother’s dolls that cannot be replicated elsewhere.

Frazier’s work in *Notion of Family* is autobiographical as the substance of her representational portraiture documents her circumstance. However, as Frazier continues to put out new photographic bodies of work, her subject matter begins to move outside of her context of Braddock Pennsylvania as she begins to enter communities that she is an outsider to. In 2016 Frazier was commissioned to produce a photographic body of work that documented the water crisis in Flint, Michigan. Frazier entered Flint with an intention of photographing three generations of women who were dealing with the water crisis on a day to day basis. During her five month stay in Flint, Frazier met two women she would grow close with, Amber Hasan and
Shea Cobb, both artists, poets, and activists. Shea Cobb would become a central subject in the photographs that Frazier produced in Flint, along with her mother, Ms. Renée, and her eight year old daughter, Zion\textsuperscript{40}. This approach in documenting the impacts of environmental racism in Flint is quite aligned with Frazier’s approach in documenting how similar structures had impacted Braddock only two years prior.

One image from this series depicts Shea Cobb with her mother and daughter, standing in front of a store front (see figure 29). Cobb and her mother stand besides each other behind Zion, as Cobb rests her right elbow upon her mother’s shoulder, reminiscent of Lawson's representation of daughters leaning on mothers in \textit{Wanda and Daughters}. Cobb puts her left hand on Zion’s shoulder, who is quite shorter than her, and all three gaze into the camera with similar neutral expressions. Frazier’s interest in making photographs of Cobb with her mother and daughter as a means of documenting life in Flint mirrors her work in \textit{Notion of Family}, in which she used images of herself, her mother and grandmother as a means of documenting life in Braddock. Even the title of this body of work, \textit{Flint is Family}, blurs a boundary between her own community and experience and the content that she produced in Flint during 2016. This sense of Shea Cobb and Flint being a mirror of Frazier and Braddock raises questions of to what extent this image of the Cobb family reflects the Frazier family and vice versa? An idea of self becomes a shared language between Frazier and the subjects she documents, as her work in areas like Flint and Braddock is tied up in her own experience and therefore in her body. There’s a sense that Frazier's photographs represent self even when her images don’t depict her or her family, as the substance of her representations is tied to her origins and experiences. While the images in \textit{Flint is Family} are not autobiographical their substance is and this distinction between substance

\textsuperscript{40}“Q&A With LaToya Ruby Frazier and Gregory Crewdson - YouTube,” April 27 2020, accessed April 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w-vGF8QEzKw.
Figure 29. LaToya Ruby Frazier, Flint is Family, 2016.
and image is unique to bell hooks’ oppositional gaze, which developed in response to mainstream representations that would rarely possess both a compelling image and substance.

In this sense, Lawson’s images operate similarly to the way that Frazier’s do in *Flint is Family*, as both bodies of work source subjects outside of their families and their contexts. While the images from *Notion of Family* and *Kitchen Table Series* fall under the category of self-portraits, Lawson’s images by definition are traditional portraiture. As a result it would be most straightforward to claim that Lawson’s images don’t represent self at all. However, if our discussion of Weems’ life in relation to the narrative of *Kitchen Table Series* and the similarities between Frazier’s self portraits and her portraiture revealed anything, it was that personal identity, experience, and interest always mold the way in which photographs are composed. In seeking where Lawson’s self is represented in her photographs we must look to her past, her earliest works, and what informed them because, unlike Frazier, the images that we examine from Lawson are her most recent works, forcing us to look backwards rather than forwards.

About a decade ago on March 28th 2012, Lawson gave a lecture at the International Center of Photography as part of their Photographers Lectures Series that went on from February 1st to April 18th. Starting promptly at 7:00pm, Lawson began her lecture by showing several images from her family’s photo albums41. As she began with various portraits of her ancestors, Lawson said “I’m also just interested in looking at photographs of people that I never met, but that I know I’m intimately and biologically connected to.”42 Already we get a sense of what informs Lawson’s current image-making and how it relates to herself. While Lawson and her subjects don’t have histories together prior to the act of creating a photograph, her subjects’ positions as

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strangers to her seems to overlap with her feelings towards her family. Lawson’s interest in seeing images of people that are strangers to her is a result of this notion that in some way, shape, or form, they are still “intimately and biologically connected”. Lawson's image-making process is grounded in her formative experiences of seeing family portraits, and self bleeds into the portraiture that she creates currently through this overlap between her definition of stranger and her definition of family. Lawson’s own early practice of critical looking blurs the boundary between a stranger and family—specifically through the object of the photograph—resulting in her intimately constructed images to be recreations of her own experience with family albums and portraiture. While Frazier used images of her mother and her grandmother to represent self and context, Lawson added another dimension to this already complex representational relationship. Lawson’s strangers are a representational vehicle for family, and family is a representational vehicle for expressing Lawson’s self. In revisiting bell hooks' ideas on ‘counter-memory’, “we see our history as counter-memory, using it as a way to know the present”\textsuperscript{43}, Lawson recreates her family albums, her ‘counter-memories’, to redefine the present, and therefore redefine herself.

Lawson begins most of her lectures with images from her family albums, and she does the same in a lecture for an Artist Talk at the Art Institute of Chicago about three years later on October 15th, 2015\textsuperscript{44}. In this lecture, Lawson begins with an image of her mother that she and her sister Dana worked on together when they were nine years old. Lawson’s mother requested that her two daughters help her make the photograph for a pin-up calendar she was making for her husband to celebrate their marriage. The image was taken in the living room of their three


bedroom ranch they occupied in Rochester, New York during the eighties. Lawson’s mother reclines in the center of the room over two bean bags, wearing a black dress and bright gold earrings. She gazes into the camera similarly to the way that Lawson’s current subjects do, and the way that the interior is densely and meticulously decorated speaks to the interiors of her more recent images as well (see figure 30). In the lecture, Lawson recalls that she felt frustrated during the shoot, and couldn’t ignore a feeling that she needed to engage with this process more than she had access to as a nine year old. What a young Lawson didn’t know at the time was that the process of creating a photograph would eventually integrate itself into her daily life, and that aspects of this 1980s composition – her mother’s pose and the details of the interior – would inform all of the images that she would come to make.

It is significant that Lawson’s images of black women from the past decade still imitate this early 1988 photograph of her mother. *Nicole (2016)* is an example of this, as the female subject, Nicole, reclines along the floor of a living room with a couch behind her while gazing into the camera lens (see figure 31). *Otisha (2013)*, is composed similarly, as the outstretched legs of a female figure who is partially reclined on a beige leather couch imitate her mother’s outstretched legs which extend beyond the image frame (see figure 32). Thinking back to our earlier discussion of Wallace’s text and the complex relationship between black mothers and black daughters, who share a sort of sameness while in opposition. The photographs of Weems, Frazier, and Lawson that represented daughters as small versions of their mothers, imitations, or as mothers-in-progress, imagine and express the perspectives of black daughters who do the act of imitating. As this emphasis on sameness between black mothers and daughters speaks to the perspective of the daughter, who is consciously or unconsciously doing the action of imitating.

45 “Artist Talk: Deana Lawson - YouTube” (The Art Institute of Chicago, November 5, 2015), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XzjWtGGDklQ.
Figure 30. Deana Lawson, Untitled (Gladys Lawson-Watson), 1988.

Figure 31. Deana Lawson, Nicole, 2016.
her mother, their photographs suggest that black daughters look to their mothers for guidance and therefore ground their identities in their mothers’ image. A daughter’s image of her mother exists in the “counter-memory” that bell hooks describes, as a black daughter’s most accessible representational figure is likely one that takes on a maternal role. One could imagine that Lawson experienced this at an early age and looked to her mother as a representational figure, an image that her own developing identity would imitate. Therefore, photographs of her mother, like the one from 1988 and others that appeared in their family albums, may have functioned as representational objects for Lawson, images that formed her own image. As Lawson constantly references and recreates this early image of her mother in photographs like *Nicole (2016)* and *Otisha (2013)*, her subjects embody her mother’s image and therefore herself. While Lawson’s images aren’t self portraits, she appears by other means. It is the layers of Lawson’s counter-memory and her rather nostalgic photographic process that dissect and maps her own identity through the bodies of her subjects and construction of her interiors.
Figure 31. Deana Lawson, Otisha, 2013.
CONCLUSION

In conversation with Dawoud Bey, Frazier reflected on her first experiences with Carrie Mae Weems, who was a significant mentor to her during her time at Syracuse University. “Carrie Mae taught me how to speak back and address my place in history.”

This little bit of advice would go a long way for Frazier who, at the time, was struggling to make portraits of her mother and her grandmother. Earlier in the same conversation, Frazier says that at first she was “ashamed of what my earliest portraits of my mother suggested”, and that she “hid the contact sheets and the negatives.” It was another one of her mentors at SU, Kathe Kowalski, that gave Frazier a copy of Andrea Kirsh’s 1993 book on Carrie Mae Weems, prompting new ideas about how Frazier could go about documenting her family. “I knew I did not want to make stereotypical images of the drugs, violence, and poverty my family faced; but, I also believed my reality needed to be unabashedly confronted.” Weems’ images from the 1980s and 1990s played a large role in informing how a new generation of black photographers could go about using the camera to ‘speak back and address [their] place in history’, a generation that both Weems and Lawson were part of.

In an interview with a Swiss curator, black video artist and cinematographer Auhtur Jafa stated that “It doesn’t matter if a black person is behind the camera or not, because the camera itself functions as an instrument of the white gaze.”

The use of the camera as a tool for colonial visualization speaks to why Frazier felt hesitant of using it to document her community and her family. The photographic image that Frazier would produce while at SU was likely quite similar

in aesthetic and content to the images produced by the Philadelphia Housing Association a
century prior. If W.E.B. DuBois was the first to establish a new context of representational
images depicting black life at the 1900 Paris Exposition Universelle, Weems’ redefined the
quality of such images as her early work reclaimed authorship of representations of blackness in
photography. This reclaiming of authorship is a significant theme that links the three artists,
Weems, Frazier, and Lawson, with Frazier and Lawson working in response to Weems’s images
from a decade prior.

Coincidentally, Deana Lawson also mentions Weems’ influence on her own photographic
practice during a conversation between her and historian Deborah Willis. In reflecting upon the
photographic work she began at RISD, in which she would mostly make portraits of her family,
Lawson says that she felt she “had to expand [her] idea of family if she was going to move
forward in the world.” In 2004, Lawson attended a lecture given by Carrie Mae Weems in which
“she said that when she traveled to Ghana, although she had bought a ticket for a nine-hour
flight, in her mind the distance seemed much farther.” Lawson says that she “couldn't help but
think of Africa in her own psyche, as taught in western education– a continent positioned as
archaic, eons away, culturally and psychologically and spiritually far, far away. [She] knew that
one day [she] would traverse this gap and see for [herself].”48 Weems’ lecture motivated Lawson
to seek family outside of her own context and instead think about herself and her community on
a global scale. This leads to the unique relationship between Lawson and her photographs of
black women from around the globe, that speak to images of Lawson’s mother and therefore
Lawson’s own image. While Frazier reclaimed authorship of her own family, community, and

48 Deana Lawson et al., “Conversation: Deana Lawson and Deborah Willis,” in Deana Lawson (Boston:
Institute of Contemporary Art, 2021), pp. 120-125.
history, Lawson reclaimed authorship of the photographed black female subject in a diasporic context.

This reclaiming of authorship over the photograph and its content doesn’t just speak to the relationship between photography and representations of black life but also to feminist communities that used photography and video to redefine a visual language for marginalized identities. The presence of the camera in the private sphere speaks to the ways in which domestic labor is often rendered invisible, which Mierle Laderman Ukeles disrupted in her “Manifesto for Maintenance Art 1969!, Proposal for an exhibition ‘Care’”. Ukeles’ exhibition functioned to reveal the process of maintenance that often go unnoticed and unacknowledged:

B. Two Basic Systems: Development and Maintenance. The sourball of every revolution, who’s going to pick up the garbage on Monday Morning?
Development: pure individual creation; the new; changes; progress, advance, excitement, flight or fleeing.
Maintenance: keep the dust off pure individual creation; preserve the new; sustain the change; protect progress; defend and prolong the advance; renew the excitement; repeat the flight.49

This definition of maintenance and the way that Ukeles goes about exposing maintenance by dubbing it “maintenance art”, speaks to what Weems accomplished in Kitchen Table Series, as Weems’ photographs made the kitchen table visible through “kitchen table art”. Weems gives us a view into what actually goes on when women are “in the kitchen” as she demystifies this experience of confinement that exists in patriarchal contexts by revealing how everyday life unfolds around and within such private spaces. At the same time, the presence of black subjects in Weems photographs is also significant, the male subject, the daughter, and Weems herself, as

it creates a new visual language around black domesticity that counters the vacant images taken by social scientific communities, like in “One Room- Moral Hazard”.

These two opposing anthologies of imagery – depictions of black domesticity produced by black women and scientific images depicting a white-supremacist notion of black life produced by white social scientific communities – don’t speak to each other in the Oedipal narrative. It is within Molesworth’s rhizome that this reclaiming of authorship takes place. Thinking back to Molesworth’s definition of the term “sisterhood”, as a “complicated narrative of horizontal or lateral thinking”, perhaps the definition of motherhood that we explored in the second chapter can also engage with art historical perspectives and ways of examining art. If the Oedipal structure is a vertical and linear sequence in which each art historical proper name has it’s own designated spot, and sisterhood is a nonlinear horizontal field in which all works are linked with each other in varying ways, the structure of motherhood in a black feminist sense would be a circle. The circle shape speaks to the repetitive and seemingly ceaseless cycle of black motherhood, in which there’s a consistent practice of passing the torch to one’s daughter.

While the circle shape suggests a lack of development, that it doesn’t continue beyond itself like vertical or horizontal sequences do, it also speaks to a context that is specific, omnipresent, and unchanging for the most part. White supremacy, patriarchy, and other social systems of hierarchy that define black womanhood, encapsulates the context that black women artists, specifically African American women artists, have always responded to in their works. The circle describes the repetition of themes in the creative expression of black womanhood throughout several centuries, in which certain ideas are constantly repeated, revisited, and reimagined. DuBois’ ideas on ‘second sight’ in 1903 were circled back to by bell hooks in 1992 with her definition of the oppositional gaze, which Lawson circles back to in 2021 in her creative methodology.
Perhaps ‘motherhood’ isn’t too far off from Molesworth’s ‘sisterhood’, but it’s the limitation of the circular form that feels unique to a black feminist perspective. It reflects a consistent and steady critical gaze that matches the rigidity of its socio-cultural context. I imagine that my own creative practice would have a place within the circular sequence of motherhood, as my second identification with Weems, Frazier, and Lawson (other than us all being black women) was in our images which depicted similar subject matter. The circular form of motherhood suggests that mothers are immortalized through their daughters. I would like to think that eventually, Carrie Mae Weems, Deana Lawson, and LaToya Ruby Frazier will be immortalized by daughters, like myself, who take the torch and continue the creative, critical, and often melancholy cycle of image-making in response to context.
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