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My Eyes Are Up Here: Insistent Subjectification in Carrie Mae Weems's *A Veiled Woman*

A Veiled Woman, a 1991 photograph in Carrie Mae Weems's exhibit *And 22 Million Very Tired and Very Angry People*, shows a Black woman raising her arms above her head with her hands nearly together (New Museum). She fills the majority of the life-sized canvas, shrouded in a black veil dress. The woman meets the viewer with one eye, her other covered by the darkness that permeates the room. Her solemn expression accuses the viewer of seeing her posed so vulnerably. In the bottom half of the photograph, the veil becomes an opaque mass that bleeds into the shadow she casts on the plain white wall. An alternate portrait sold in 2010 shows the same woman with her hands less visible and her left eye rendered invisible by layers of the veil stretching across her elbows instead of by shadow (Weems, *Veiled Woman*). Employing physical qualities of the work, the woman's lighting and pose, and the racial contexts of the veil, Weems asserts the woman as a complex, self-determining human. Placing the agentive woman into contexts of rebellion and revolution, Weems encourages marginalized people to reclaim agency through the very structures designed to estrange them from it, and demonstrates how such acts of reclamation contribute to broader social advancement.

The work's mode—medium, color, size, orientation—establishes the woman as the human subject of the image, disrupting a Western portrait tradition of presenting Black people as objects. The medium of photography bestows a unique personhood on its subjects. As Hashimoto states, "we see in a photograph not a resemblance, but the object itself" (99). The

photograph captures a direct reflection of real life, and since *A Veiled Woman* shows an animate subject, the viewer automatically recognizes that the photograph's creation required a real person, contrasting with other mediums like paint, which have more fictitious capabilities. Specifically, the portrait takes advantage of the interpretation of *life-size* photographs as more faithful representations of their subjects than paintings or different-size photographs (Hashimoto 94). The woman's accurate scale provokes the viewer to extend their perception of her from a real-*sized* person to a *real* person and to interrogate the image further instead of passing her over as simply an image. Along with the portrait orientation of the photograph, her scale contrasts sharply with historical Western portrayal of Black people as scientific specimens and spectacles (Edwards 51-2). The effect becomes especially pungent upon realizing that *And 22 Million* is Weems's first collection in full color (Trippi 1). The departure from monochrome symbolizes a movement of history from the past into the present, making its lasting effects visible ("Colourising historical photos"). The color makes her more realistic and therefore more real. In a genre of heavily objectifying portraits, the humanization present in *A Veiled Woman* consciously breaks with the norm, allowing the viewer to fully analyze the portrait's historical and human contexts.

The woman's pose and the light cast on her strategically present her as a conscious person active in her own imaging rather than as a passive subject. Her arms come up and away from her torso, giving up a natural shield around her core and conveying vulnerability, in a stance that invites the viewer to look at her body. However, that body is obscured by darkness; the single light source reveals only the woman's arms and face, and even they are hard to make out in the dearth of contrast. The perspective of the shot forces the viewer to instead return her gaze, reducing their capacity to hold her body as an object. The woman knows we are looking at

her, and in fact tells us that we can only do so because she has consciously and specifically presented herself to the camera. Lewis names an "insistent reveal—[an] indexical trace of forcibly undressing a subject through partial disrobing"—characteristic of photographs of Black people before the mid-19th century that aimed to interrogate their nature by putting them on display (300). The woman in Weems's piece directly opposes this trope, in control of her clothes rather than forcibly disrobed, in control of what is seen of her rather than ordered to pose by an enslaver, and meeting the viewer in only two photographs, both shot from the same angle, rather than from multiple vantage points and detached profile shots. She is the protagonist of her own portrait.

The veil is foremost a covering, a symbol of the historic ignorance of violence against Black people, that the woman lifts. It recalls the secrecy in which enslaved women and their children were held. The prominent enslaver Thomas Jefferson likely had six children by raping Sally Hemings, a woman whom he enslaved (Stockman). The sexual abuse of Black women was hidden by White men who wished to have their cake and eat it, too—to derive pleasure from the women they enslaved yet avoid passing social privilege onto resulting children. A metaphorical veil covers the women and their children, a barrier between them and the world, a cage transparent enough that they become an "open secret" (Stockman). Du Bois generalizes a Veil of Race that renders the harm done to Black people invisible to allow White people to continue the harm without guilt (38). As long as the Veil exists, it destroys, "produc[ing] a peculiar wrenching of the soul, a peculiar sense of doubt and bewilderment" (105). The woman in *A Veiled Woman* represents this struggle with her gaze, a double vision, one eye faced outward and one kept inside, blocked by the veil. Her black veil mourns the wrenched souls, conspicuously displaying the perpetual violence set upon Black people. These unavoidable symbols of pain control the

focal point of the portrait, directing all attention to the woman's face, finally reversing their function and making her *visible* as a human. Djebar details how a gaze from *inside* the veil, looking outward, reclaims visibility by accusing the oppressor of attempting to hide the looker away (138). The woman strips racial violence of its secrecy behind the Veil, insisting that the terrible history of race be recognized in its uncomfortableness, for only in its recognition may we learn how to rectify it.

Weems uses the veil to similarly unmask the possibilities of individual acts of subversion against discrimination and racial borders. The partial opacity/transparency of the woman's veil gives its wearer two perceivable bodies. From afar, the person behind the veil cannot be discerned, just as without considering the agency of individuals, people of a race become an oppressed mass. The person can only be seen from the more intimate perspective of the portrait, close enough to reveal their humanity through the veil. The individual can function despite the specter of discrimination, and can subvert the structures meant to broadly oppress them. The woman in *A Veiled Woman* subverts simply by wearing the veil. Such a fine, unblemished cloth evokes fashion and wealth. By virtue of its value, the veil would probably have been prohibited to a Black woman under sumptuary laws meant to degrade the social status of Black people relative to White people (Lewis 310). Here the veil translates the idea of class used to perpetuate White superiority onto the body of a Black woman, elevating her status using the hierarchy that was built to keep marginalized people in place. The woman at once makes the presence of the Veil known and reaches through it to obtain the social mobility that she is entitled to as a human.

Weems argues that such individual rebellions heavily contribute to social change, particularly liberation from oppression. Trippi connects *A Veiled Woman* to the image of a veiled Algerian woman in the Algerian Revolution (2). Fanon describes French colonial strategy in

Algeria as to forcibly liberate Muslim women from their veils to gain their favor, and in turn that of Algerian men (36-8). Algerian women later participated in the Revolution by subverting precisely this idea of civilization by unveiling: they forwent their veils to pass as French to spy and smuggle (58-9). By seizing agency of wearing and not wearing the veil, the women steered their own actual liberation as Algeria ultimately won independence (Faulkner 847). Weems's exhibit carries a similarly revolutionary tone, the name highlighting a population of individuals (*22 Million People*) as crucial to the revolutionary toolset of Paul Seeger's song "If I Had a Hammer" (Trippi 2). Furthermore, Weems accompanies *A Veiled Woman* with a quote from Chekov: "… our sufferings will turn into joy for those who will be living after us …" (*And 22 Million*, San Francisco). Through the theme of revolution in the collection, the inclusion of the individual, subversive woman in *A Veiled Woman*, and the quote looking forward to a brighter future resulting from present struggle, Weems urges the viewer to subvert the methods of *their* oppression in an advance toward collective liberation.

The veil as a symbol of revelation and reclamation disproves the notion that those who attempt to work subversively within systems of hierarchy are structurally doomed; here the woman clearly advances her status as an agent in control of how others can view her. The purposeful form and pose of her portrait shows her ability to display herself as an unequivocal, thinking, feeling subject in the face of a history that delegates Black people as objects to be observed or hidden at the White whim. Weems proposes that the individual struggle powerfully counteracts such historical violence, and explains how it is key to the deconstruction of violent systems. As Du Bois finds inevitable, she subverts the Veil from a symbol of oppression into one of revolution (105).

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