

Memory and Landscape in the Sea Islands Series by Carrie Mae Weems

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Abstract | In her *Sea Islands* series (1991–1992), photographer and visual artist Carrie Mae Weems visits the Georgia/Carolina coast in the United States, enacting and enlivening the African-American memory in the region. Combining photography, text, and ceramics, Weems creates an original hybrid language to depict the physical landscape and the history of the Sea Islands, where African people were once brought as slaves and later formed a unique Creole culture known as Gullah-Geechee. The concepts of home, land, and memory in the framework of African diaspora are explored through a vivid recounting of Gullah-Geechee folklore and the traumatic memory of slavery. The paper examines how Weems addresses the subject as both an insider and an outsider, questioning the mainstream American history and culture through African-American memory. It also highlights the significance of landscape in the expression and transmission of memory.

Keywords | memory, landscape, photography, slavery, African American, folklore, Gullah-Geechee.

In her *Sea Islands* series (1991–1992), photographer and visual artist Carrie Mae Weems examines how African-American memory can be integrated into contemporary

mainstream American history and culture. Through photographs, Weems explores the physical landscapes and architecture along the Georgia/Carolina coast in the United States, where the African people were once brought as slaves and whose descendants still reside. As most images lack human presence, they can be read as merely documentary or archaeological at first sight. However, text and ceramics interspersed with the images in the exhibition reflect the African traditions of verbal storytelling and pottery making, and they provide a historical and cultural context to the landscapes depicted. The photographs of a contemporary place simultaneously become the images of the past, bringing back the memory of silenced people to the present. Weems also uses the elements of performance to tell the story of the Sea Islands from different perspectives: as subject and author, and as engaged participant and objective observer. The *Sea Islands* series thus blurs the boundaries of time, space, and subjectivity, inviting the viewers to experience the constructed story of the place and the memory of its people as their own. The paper also intends to highlight how the memory of a place is revealed through a contemporary practice of multimedia storytelling.

Carrie Mae Weems, born in 1953 in Portland, Oregon, has been practicing photography since the early 1970s. Weems developed her journalistic, documentary style into a more conceptual approach during a career that spans more than three decades, all the while exploring the themes of race, sexuality, identity and history as observed in the complex reality of modern life. Although her focus on black subjects sometimes leads to a simplified understanding of her work as merely racial, Weems intends to express powerful emotions that are shared among people of any origin, for example, a longing to understand where one comes from and how it affects the present self. This was also the motivation for creating the *Sea Islands* series:

Home for me is both mysterious and mythic—the known and the unknown. My search begins with the *Sea Islands* piece. That initial focus on family folklore was the beginning of my searching out a home place, trying to figure out for myself, that moment in the early 1980s, where I come from, how is that place constructed, what went on there, what was that sort of historical movement about (quoted in hooks, 1995: 77).

Through the experiences of her parents who migrated from Mississippi to Oregon before Weems was born, Weems tries to “understand” the meaning of the displacement of her family and many other African Americans. Marianne Hirsch argues that we can also “remember” the memories of the traumatic events experienced by the previous

generation. The stories of the parents' experiences told in an intimate, domestic setting can have such an impact on the children who grow up among them that they even "seem to constitute memories in their own right" (Hirsch, 2008: 107). Hirsch calls this the *postmemory*, the traumatic event remembered only through stories, photographs, and other forms of transmitted memory available to the ones who came too late to experience it directly. Weems' quest for home also started by tracing back the familial memory and then expanded to encompass a larger collective memory of the African diaspora.

This concept of home does not signify a physical location for settling down, but it is found rather – as bell hooks points out that "home is not a place but a condition" (hooks, 1995: 71) – in the act of perpetual seeking itself. It is a connection experienced psychologically among the displaced African people and their descendents, and the struggle to find home unites the people regardless of their geographical or ethnic origin within Africa.¹ Homecoming in this diasporic sense requires the understanding of folklore, religious beliefs, vernacular landscapes, and many more aspects that constitute the multifaceted African-American experience. Reality cannot be understood merely through the intellectual knowledge of past events collected in mainstream archives. Imagination and fabrication are sometimes needed to grasp the depth and complexity of the impact of the past in the present. What underlies the *Sea Islands* series is the notion that has been repeatedly argued in postcolonial discourse. Homi Bhabha describes it as "past-present," the state of being conscious of the past, not to evoke nostalgia but to critically consider the present and construct the future. The past must be renewed or refigured "as a contingent 'in-between' space, that innovates and interrupts the performance of the present" (Bhabha, 1994: 7). Weems creates a hybrid language of the visual, the verbal, and the tangible to represent the African-American memory through which she questions the present American concept of home.

Photography, among other modes of static visual representation, problematizes the relationship between past and present, real and fiction the most. It is undeniable that a photograph captures a real thing that actually existed, and yet all photographs are always fictitious in a sense that they reflect the photographer's personal sensibility or purpose through framing, focusing, and editing. A photograph reminds the viewer of

¹ Stuart Hall reminds us that the slaves were from "different countries, tribal communities, villages, languages, and gods. (...) The paradox is that it was the uprooting of slavery and transportation and the insertion into the plantation economy (as well as the symbolic economy) of the Western world that 'unified' these peoples across their differences, in the same moment as it cut them off from direct access to their past" (Hall, 2000: 25).

what was in the past, but it is not the memory itself. Unlike memory, a photograph has a physical presence. This materiality creates a sense that “we have in a photograph surrogate possession of a cherished person or thing” (Sontag, 1990: 155). In photography, an image of an object is inseparable from the object itself, and a photograph can infinitely reproduce the presence of something long gone. A photograph resurrects, as Roland Barthes explains: “the Photograph always leads the corpus I need back to the body I see” (Barthes, 1981: 4). As a photograph can bring the past back to the present, it can also turn the present into the past. “All photographs are *memento mori*,” states Susan Sontag. “To take a photograph is to participate in another person’s (or thing’s) mortality, vulnerability, mutability” (Sontag, 1990: 155). A photograph gives eternity to its subject by turning it into a visual object, but it also constantly questions the stability of the present.

The Sea Islands were an ideal location for starting the quest for home by using this distinctive nature of photography that makes the past intersect with the present. In addition to their proximity to the important ports of the slave trade such as Charleston and Savannah, the islands are still home to Gullah-Geechee people, the descendents of freed slaves who, due to the long isolation from the mainland, retain much of the African and Creole traditions to this day. The Sea Islands, also called the barrier islands, constantly go through dynamic geographical changes while protecting the mainland from hurricanes and other extreme weather. Although some islands are developed for tourism, access to many of them is still limited. The fact that the plantation and slave community sites are better preserved than in the inland areas also prompted the region to be chosen for intensive archaeological research on African diaspora since the late 1960s (Singleton, 2010: 152). And the *Wanderer*, an illegal slave ship that arrived at Jekyll Island located off the coast of Georgia in 1858, became the last recorded landing of slaves brought across the Atlantic (Morgan, 2010: 33). Thus, the islands are a significant place that historically, culturally, and symbolically links America to Africa.

Perhaps the most poignant story of the Sea Islands is that of the Ebo (also Ibo or Igbo) Landing. According to historical records, a group of Ebo people rebelled against the white overseers in 1803 while being transported from Skidaway Island to St. Simons on a ship. Refusing to become slaves, the Ebo drowned themselves in Dunbar Creek, a place now known as Ebo Landing on St. Simons Island (Powell, 2010: 253-254). This story of resistance inspired many varying narratives that explain that the Ebo flew or walked on the water to go back to Africa instead of committing suicide and

is an important element in African-American folklore and literature. *Drums and Shadows*, a collection of interviews conducted as part of the Federal Writers' Project (FWP) in the 1930s in coastal Georgia, contains a brief description of the event recounted by a resident of St. Simons Island:

"Das duh place weah dey bring duh Ibos obuh in a slabe ship an wen dey git yuh, dey ain lak it an so dey all staht singin an dey mahch right down in duh ribbuh tuh mahch back tuh Africa, but dey ain able tuh git deah. Dey gits drown" (WPA, 1986: 185).

Although the writers involved were not specialists in the language of Gullah-Geechee, care was taken to transcribe the speech as accurately as possible, and the writings lend insight into the sounds and the narratives that Weems evokes through her work.

In the *Sea Islands* series, the story of the Ebo Landing is depicted in a set of vertically aligned square panels. Here, a text panel is placed between two black-and-white photographs of subtropical landscapes with lush vegetation. The first photograph shows a creek leading the eye of the viewer into the image. Some trees and grass are present in the foreground, and a row of palm trees is visible in the background. Some of the palm trees fall against each other, forming a triangular, gate-like shape. There is no creek in the second image, but a couple of palm trees form a triangle similar to the one in the first image, creating a formal pattern between the two images.

While these images are carefully designed, there is nothing in the photographs to help identify where these places are. The text panel therefore serves as title and description, but it is also a component of the artwork as it is given the same amount of space as the photographs and framed in the same way.

EBO LANDING

One midnight at high tide a
ship bringing in a cargo of Ebo (Ibo)
men landed at Dunbar Creek on the
Island of St. Simons. But the men refus-
ed to be sold into slavery; joining hands
together they turned back toward the
water, chanting, "the water brought us
the water will take us away." They all
drowned, but to this day when the
breeze sighs over the marshes and
through the trees, you can hear the

clank of chains and echo of
their chant at Ebo Landing.
(Included in Kirsh, 1993: 102)

The text is cut at odd places so as to form a round shape that can evoke the moon, which symbolizes the time of the story. It is meant not only to be read but also to be looked at, just like the photographs. The text also resonates with the ceramic plates displayed in the same gallery space. Every plate bears a text that starts with the phrase “went looking for Africa,” and one plate reads “WENT LOOKING FOR AFRICA and found Africa here in the proverbs of McIntosh in the voices of Sapelo in the songs of St. Simons...” (Sterling, 1994: 33). The song of the Ebo, the story of their drowning, and the landscape intertwine in the experience of the viewer.

The fact that the two images are unpopulated may be suggesting the vanishing of the Ebo people, the irrevocability of the past. But it also gives an impression that the landscape itself is telling the story. Fine arts photographer Ori Gersht’s exhibition, *The Clearing* (UK tour, 2006-7), featured a series of still pictures of holocaust sites. The landscape no longer marks any traces of the history, but Gersht explains that, as the trees and the land are incomparably older than any person, “they bear with them the memory of all previous events and at the same time keep a certain silence and are impenetrable” (Wells, 2011: 299). In analyzing this work, Liz Wells concludes that

the suggestion that nature literally absorbs history through the soil connects with the idea of a collective unconscious. Gersht deploys pictorial tradition and archetypal responses rhetorically in order to support a claim that these sites remain of particular significance as they represent the horror of not too distant histories (Wells, 2011: 299).

This Jungian overtone is definitely felt in *Ebo Landing* as well. The palm trees and the creek can be seen as metaphors of the past tragedy, quietly recalling the memory of the Ebo people.

The House is another piece that shows no human figure in the image. Here, three photographs are aligned horizontally across the wall with a text panel placed beneath them. The brick cabins depicted in each photograph are slightly different from one another, but the triangular shape of the roofs creates a harmonizing pattern throughout the images. This shape is repeated in the accompanying text as well, and as Thelma Golden describes Weems’ work as “an inspired partnership of vision and voice” (Golden and Piche, 1998: 32), the visual rhythm created by the repeating shapes unites

the four panels and works in tandem with the verbal tempo of the text.

The house in the middle seems to be a storage house rather than a living space. The other houses share the same design with two windows and a chimney, indicating that they belong to the same community. They have an appearance similar to other former slave cabins left on the Sea Islands. The condition of the two houses on either side is also congruent with the archaeological findings that show that most windows in slave quarters were unglazed and wooden shutters were used to open and close windows (Singleton, 2010: 167). These cabins are uninhabited now, but the fact that they are relatively well preserved and some lumber and a cart are present in the image indicate that they are respected as part of a historical site and are well maintained.² Unlike the *Ebo Landing* photographs, these images of *The House* give clues of human presence in them, both past and present, intensifying the sense of absence. It is the heightened presence of absence that can be felt in them, and the text further enhances this eerie feel:

THE HOUSE

When you move into
a new house, remove old
spirits by washing around the win-
dows and doors with vinegar water. But,
prevent spirits from crossing the doorstep by
putting salt and pepper along the door and window sills.
Trimming the windows in blue will ward off hags,
witches and other evil spirits.
Wall paper your home with newspaper. Before a hag can bother
you, it must read every word. And if it can't read, then there you go.
But newspaper strung between an antenna will do the job too.
Place rice in the four corners of your home for good luck and
put a glass of water in a corner to absorb evil spirits.
A kitchen knife stuck into the wood over the door will keep
witches out of the house when the family is away.
If you swept dust out of the house at sunset you just might sweep away
the spirit of a family member.
Never build an addition to your house. A home can never be extended.
(Included in Kirsh, 1993: 108).

² These cabins are found in the slave quarters of the Boon Hall Plantation near Charleston, South Carolina. "It is known for its majestic avenue of oaks and the nine original eighteenth-century slave cabins, which were occupied by sharecroppers well into the twentieth century" (Mack, 2008: 7). Having been featured in movies and television productions, Boon Hall is considered to be an iconic plantation. As Angela Mack points out "a contemporary archaeological dig site" in another image in the *Sea Islands* series, it can be assumed that the lumber and the cart in *The House* are also used for archaeological studies on the site.

The words accumulate in the form of a house, and some practical advice on housekeeping, based on spiritual beliefs, is given. It is a house crowded with words or spirits, both good and evil, to which the words refer.

Although Protestant practices were already prevalent in the slave communities by the early 19th century, the tradition of conjuring from West and West Central Africa was also an important part of the African-American life (Clarke, 2010:132). Unlike a ghost, a witch in the Gullah-Geechee culture is considered to be a living person, usually an old neighbor who lives alone. Witches can be women or men (WPA, 1986: 185), and they were thought to have supernatural ability to take any form of their choice and sneak into a house to torment, or “ride,” the occupants. With her familiarity with the Gullah traditions (Weems studied folklore at Berkeley in the 1980s), Weems enumerates the to-do’s and not-to-do’s to protect one’s self and family from evil spirits. By doing so, she demonstrates how a house can simultaneously be the most familiar and unfamiliar place to a person. She also indicates that a house requires labor in order to keep it safe for resting and other domestic activities. “Never build an addition to your house,” Weems writes, because “a home can never be extended” (Kirsh, 1993: 108). The meaning of a house is finally expanded so that the word becomes a metaphor for “home,” a much broader concept than just a shelter. Through the enumeration of traditions found in this particular region, the text thus reveals universal insights about the concept of home. And these insights nurture the traditions in return.

The fact that the title only signifies one definitive house while the photographs show three similar but different houses also suggests the push and pull between individuation and universalization that this piece implies. The photographed cabins constitute the image of a metaphoric house that stands for all the cabins that were once inhabited by the people in this region. The cabins represent the remnant of the life that used to be, the memories of the people who lived there. *The House* as a group of panels including text also signifies all houses in the world, becoming an icon of home itself. But the photographs cannot totally escape from the elements indicating each cabin’s individuality in the context of present landscape. The lumber and the cart tie each cabin to a specific place and time, disturbing the process of universalization. Due to the inability of the camera to discriminate and exclude, a photograph always allows for “a substrate or margin of excess, a subversive code present in every photographic image that makes it open and available to other readings and uses” (Pinney, 2003: 6). By

combining text and multiple photographs in *The House*, Weems emphasizes what Elizabeth Edwards calls “the photograph’s infinite recodability” (Edwards, 2001: 7). With their ability to indiscriminately capture details, photographs can convey so many meanings so that “There is seldom a ‘correct interpretation’: one can say what a photograph is not, but not absolutely what it is” (Edwards, 2001: 8). Instead of serving as a caption/description, the text panel actively participates in adding meanings to the already recodable photographs.

Another thing that captures attention in *The House* is the way the photographs are taken. The frontal shots, which recall the style of Walker Evans, provide a clear, direct view of the houses at the same time depriving them of their architectural depth. This way of presentation invites the viewer to carefully study each image and its place in the sequence, comparing one image against another to find a coherent narrative in the simplistic and fragmented views of the reality. Like in Evans’ *American Photography* (1938), storytelling is at the heart of Weems’ work. Allan Trachtenberg observes that “the book (*American Photography*) exists as a complete act only in the reader’s experience of making sense of the discontinuous but tightly knit flow of images” (Trachtenberg, 1989: 284). *The House* too acts out a scene that calls for the active presence of the viewer to experience the story.

The element of performance has a significant meaning in Weems’ art. As Kathryn Delmez cites Weems:

through the act of performance, with our own bodies, we are allowed to experience and connect the historical past to the present—to the now, to the moment...we live the experience; we stand in the shadows of others and come to know firsthand what is often only imagined, lost, forgotten (quoted in Lombardi, 2012).

Weems believes that the participation of the body is crucial to understanding history. Although an enactment of a memory is not the same as having a direct experience of the past event in question, the body plays a significant role in transmitting memory from a generation to the next. As Hirsch points out, intergenerational transmission of traumatic memory usually occurs through “the language of family, the language of the body: nonverbal and noncognitive acts” (Hirsch, 2008: 112). The bodily experience of living closely with the person emanating pain and sorrow or looking at the photographs with familiar faces in them cultivates a sense of “living connection” (Hirsch, 2008: 111) to the past in the younger generation in the form of postmemory.

Although most of the photographs exclude human figures, there is a photograph that features Weems herself in the *Sea Islands* series as well (Patterson, 2000: 36). In this image, Weems acts as a weeping woman in a contemporary living room setting. She wears a white dress and covers her head with a matching cloth. Behind her is a framed photograph of a white man, probably a priest, dressed in a black garment. There are some other objects suggesting Christian religion such as candles and red wine in the background as well. The contrast between the peaceful atmosphere of the background and the intense distress that the woman expresses indicates a complex status of Western religious traditions that are both integrated in and irreconcilable with the African-American spirituality. Leslie King-Hammond finds the religious beliefs at the center of the African life and explains that the enslaved Africans preserved their religious traditions by finding “safe and sacred ‘spaces of blackness’” in the plantation environment (King-Hammond, 2008: 58). In the weeping woman picture, Weems tries to inscribe herself into the history of her ancestors, instead of providing an objective observation of the traumatizing memory of slavery and racism. An emotion that penetrates the American history is made visible in this carefully staged photograph as a single, condensed image, demanding attention from the viewer. Like a performance, this photograph presents an intensified image of the collective memory through “deliberate, conscious efforts to represent” (Edwards, 2001: 17). It is like a mask that distills the essence of something into pure meaning (Barthes, 1981: 34). Edwards writes,

the heuristic device of performativity makes it possible to see images as active, as the past is projected actively into the present by the nature of the photograph itself and the act of looking at a photograph (Edwards, 2001: 18).

By inserting her own image in the photograph, Weems draws attention to the ambivalent nature of her role as the author/subject. Weems’ philosophical approach to photography is similar to that of Hulleah J. Tsinhnahjinnie when she expresses her suspicion of “the awkward, self-appointed ‘expert’ narrative” (Tsinhnahjinnie, 2003: 41) regarding Native Americans created by the white authority. Instead of looking at the photographs of Native Americans through a “scientific godly order” (Tsinhnahjinnie, 2003: 41), Tsinhnahjinnie demonstrates a way of reading the images based on aboriginal philosophy and religion, bringing back into focus the spirituality and the oral traditions that have been disregarded and erased from “official” history. Weems further shifts the power structure of looking by transforming the author with a

privileged bird's-eye view to the subject that is being looked at. The viewer is automatically implicated in this dynamic form of looking and is invited to participate in the making of the meanings of the past.

But why did Weems use such deliberate ways to shift meanings and points of view? If her intention was to create a counter-memory to fill in the gap of the mainstream history and empower African-Americans, like W.E.B. Du Bois used visual art to construct the African-American identity in the early 20th century (Kirschke, 2007: 6 and 226), she could have used photographs that represent people or landscapes in a more straightforward manner. Perhaps it is not only *what* we remember, but also *how* we remember it and how a traumatic memory is passed down that are important concerns in the *Sea Islands* series.

The Georgia slave code of 1770 defines a monetary penalty for those who attempt to teach slaves how to read and write (King, 1966: 182). The enslaved Africans were constrained by double linguistic limitations: first, they could not communicate with each other in their native language as people from different tribes were intentionally mixed to avoid solidarity among slaves, and second, they were forbidden to participate in the written culture even if they learned English. These constraints, however, did not prevent the Gullah-Geechee people from forming a unique culture and passing it on to their offspring through generations. The key to this continuity is in their oral storytelling traditions and the way they remember and honor their ancestors. They have, for example, distinct customs regarding funerals and visiting a grave. The traditions of decorating the grave with plates that belonged to the deceased (as explained in the text panel in Figure 3) and of bringing food to the grave to eat with the deceased can be seen in multiple communities on the Sea Islands.³ Weems refers to these traditions in a group of three photographs of a graveyard aligned vertically and a text panel entitled *Boneyard* placed next to them.

The three photographs show different views of a graveyard with modern residential buildings in the background. The graveyard located in the middle of a contemporary landscape suggests the endangered state of a culture confronting

³ *Drums and Shadows* collects a story of a woman who brings chicken, cake, pie, and cigars to her husband's grave (WPA, 1989: 59). It also observes "the practice of placing broken bits of pottery and possessions last used by the dead person on the grave for the purpose of supplying the needs of the spirit" (WPA, 1989: 95) in several different communities, and links it to the similar practices found in African countries. In the Pin Point community, "it was customary for family members to bring a dish that was a favorite of the deceased, such as okra and crab soup, to his or her grave site. This often continued for several months" (Pin Point Heritage Museum, Savannah, GA on "Burial Practices," visited in Feb 2014).

modern development, but it also implies its survival against the odds. The plates placed on the gravestones are visible in the images, and it creates a link between the photographs and the dinner plates in the exhibition. As “the grave-yards of Hilton Head” (Sterling, 1994: 33) are mentioned in the text on the plate discussed earlier, the location is possibly Hilton Head Island, home to the South Carolina Gullah people and also a thoroughly developed island resort. The plates give a physical presence to the African traditions concerning burial and pottery making, which were prominent especially among the enslaved Africans in the South Carolina Lowcountry. But as Theresa Singleton points out, some archaeologists see the slave-made pottery found in this region “as a Creole product combining the pottery traditions of Africans, Native Americans, and Europeans” (Singleton, 2010: 158) that developed through colonial interactions. The plates connect the dead to the act of eating, an essential part of living, through which people from different cultures encountered and interacted by living in the same region. The theme also evokes how archaeologists often collect fragments of pottery to piece them together so as to reconstruct the past itself. The plates thus represent both the cultural and metaphorical act of remembering the past.

A rather quiet atmosphere of the photographs is disrupted by the content of the text panel:

BONEYARD

alarm clocks wake the dead on judgment day
 kerosene lamps light the path to glory
 the last cup, plate and spoon used by the departed
 should be placed on the grave
 keep a child safe from a dead person's spirit
 by passing the child over the dead person's
 body or coffin

If you suspect that a person has been killed by hoodoo, put a cassava stick in the hand and he will punish the murderer. If he was killed by violence, put the stick in one hand and a knife and fork in the other. The spirit of the murdered one will first drive the slayer insane, and then kill him with great violence.

If people die wishing to see someone, they will stay limp and warm for days. They are still waiting.

If a person dies who has not had his fling in this world, he will turn on his face in his grave.

**I got a black cat bone
 I got a mojo tooth
 I got John the Conqueror
 I'm gonna mess with you**
 (Included in Kirsh, 1993: 104)

The subject of the text shifts from various objects to the second person (“If *you* suspect...”), to the third person (“*They* are still waiting”), and finally to the first person (“*I* got a black cat bone”), giving a kaleidoscopic view of the African folk beliefs concerning death. In these beliefs, the body is still an active element in the living world even after death and it has the power to engage with living persons by, for example, carrying out revenge. The description is quite brutal, and it prompts the viewer in an urgent tone to adhere to the traditional practices to prevent misfortunes from happening. As the narrator closes in on the viewer at the end of the passage (“I’m gonna mess with you”), the viewer can no longer be safely detached from what is depicted in the text.

In Gullah-Geechee traditions, the gravestones are often arranged so that they are facing East, homeward to Africa. The gravestones in *Boneyard* are given the function of connecting the living people to their ancestors. They represent the collective memory that not only confirms a community’s origins or identity, but also influences the present life, sometimes even to the point of threatening it. It is a memory that is not simply remembered as the vanishing past, but also continuously renewed and expanded in the current lives of people who remember.

Memory is like landscapes, which with their longevity and constant presence act as witness to the distant past. However, a landscape is also “impenetrable,” and the photographs depicting the site of trauma position us within at the same time as excluding us from the place. Examining the contemporary photographs of former concentration camps in Europe, Ulrich Baer calls attention to the fact that there is nothing that indicates the significance of the place in the images. Landscape is not nature itself but an aesthetic and cultural way in which we see nature. And yet it can also exist to emphasize that there is nothing left to see there, to heighten the sense of loss. The lives of the people who were brought there were so thoroughly eradicated that only absence can characterize the site being photographed. The Holocaust rendered the location “a nonplace closed to visitors and to memory” (Baer, 2000: 75). Thus, a trauma that cannot be forgotten nor properly remembered continues to haunt specific sites.

The Sea Islands is one of the sites marked by the traumatic memory of African-American people. By depicting such subjects as palm trees, slave cabins, and gravestones, Weems portrays both the living culture and past lives of the region’s population in the *Sea Islands* series. Taking an interdisciplinary approach, integrating

photography, text, and ceramics, Weems tells the stories omitted from the existing canons of verbally and visually recorded history. The traumatic memory of displacement and slavery is embodied through text and image, and the stories can no longer be distinguished as “theirs” or “ours.”

Through centuries, people on the Sea Islands have let the local marshes and waters shape their memory, thoughts, and imagination, and they marked the land with African traditions in return. The African and the American are inseparable for these people, and, like seawater mixing with fresh water in the estuaries, the sites voided by trauma (*Ebo Landing*) coexist with those still used by the present Gullah-Geechee communities and tourists (*Boneyard*) in the region. Weems seeks an American “home” in this hybrid nature of the place, and as Susan Sterling points out, she dives “deep into the essence of African American experience, enlivening and reconstituting its spiritual past” (Sterling, 1994: 33) to shed light to the present American society and human conditions in a global context.

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