

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Carrie Mae Weems

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## Overview of the Collection

<b>Repository:</b>	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
<b>Creator:</b>	Weems, Carrie Mae, 1953-
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Carrie Mae Weems,
<b>Dates:</b>	September 10, 2014
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2014
<b>Physical Description:</b>	6 uncompressed MOV digital video files (2:57:58).
<b>Abstract:</b>	Visual artist Carrie Mae Weems (1953 - ) was an award-winning folkloric artist represented in public and private collections around the world, including the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Museum of Modern Art, and The Art Institute of Chicago. Weems was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on September 10, 2014, in New York, New York. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2014_175
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

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## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Visual artist Carrie Mae Weems was born on April 20, 1953 in Portland, Oregon to Myrlie and Carrie Weems. Weems graduated from the California Institute of the Arts, Valencia with her B.F.A. degree in 1981, and received her M.F.A. degree in photography from the University of California, San Diego in 1984. From 1984 to 1987, she participated in the graduate program in folklore at the University of California, Berkeley.

In 1984, Weems completed her first collection of photographs, text, and spoken word entitled, *Family Pictures and Stories*. Her next photographic series, *Ain't Jokin'*, was completed in 1988. She went on to produce *American Icons* in 1989, and *Colored People* and the *Kitchen Table Series* in 1990. Weems then created the *Sea Islands Series* (1991-92), *Slave Coast* and *Africa Series* (1993), *From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried* (1995-96), *Who What When Where* (1998), *Ritual & Revolution* (1998), *Jefferson Suite* (1999), *Hampton Project* (2000), *May Days Long Forgotten* and *Dreaming in Cuba* (2002), *The Louisiana Project* (2003), *Roaming* (2006), and the *Museum Series*, which she began in 2006. She also produced the video projects *Coming Up for Air* (2004), *Italian Dreams* (2006), *Constructing History: A Requiem to Mark the Moment* (2008), and *Afro-Chic* (2009), among others.

Weems is represented by the Jack Shainman Gallery in New York City, and has exhibited her art at the Rhona Hoffman Gallery in Chicago, Illinois, and Gallery Paule Anglim in San Francisco, California. She has participated in numerous solo and group exhibitions at major national and international museums, including the Museum of Contemporary Art (Los Angeles), Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, Corcoran Gallery of Art, The Frist Center for the Visual Arts, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Tate Liverpool in England, and the Bilbao Fine Arts Museum in Spain. She is represented in public and private collections around the world, including the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Museum of Modern Art (New York), The Museum of Fine Arts (Houston), The Art Institute of Chicago, and the Portland Art Museum. In addition, Weems has taught as an assistant professor or visiting professor at Hampshire College, Hunter College, California College of Arts and

Crafts, Williams College, Harvard University, Syracuse University, and the University of Pennsylvania. Weems has received numerous awards, grants and fellowships including the Joseph H. Hazen Rome Prize Fellowship; a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship; a Smithsonian Fellowship; the Alpert Award for Visual Arts; the Louis Comfort Tiffany Award; and the Anonymous Was a Woman Foundation Award. In 2012, she was presented with one of the first U.S. Department of State's Medals of Arts in recognition for her commitment to the State Department's Art in Embassies program. In 2013, Weems received the MacArthur Foundation's "Genius" Grant, the Gordon Parks Foundation Award and the Congressional Black Caucus Foundation's Lifetime Achievement Award.

Carrie Mae Weems was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on September 10, 2014.

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## Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Carrie Mae Weems was conducted by Harriette Cole on September 10, 2014, in New York, New York, and was recorded on 6 uncompressed MOV digital video files. Visual artist Carrie Mae Weems (1953 - ) was an award-winning folkloric artist represented in public and private collections around the world, including the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Museum of Modern Art, and The Art Institute of Chicago.

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## Restrictions

### Restrictions on Access

Restrictions may be applied on a case-by-case basis at the discretion of The HistoryMakers®.

### Restrictions on Use

All use of materials and use credits must be pre-approved by The HistoryMakers®. Appropriate credit must be given. Copyright is held by The HistoryMakers®.

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## Related Material

Information about the administrative functions involved in scheduling, researching, and producing the interview, as well as correspondence with the interview subject is stored electronically both on The HistoryMakers® server and in two databases maintained by The HistoryMakers®, though this information is not included in this finding aid.

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## Controlled Access Terms

This interview collection is indexed under the following controlled access subject terms.

### Persons:

Weems, Carrie Mae, 1953-

Cole, Harriette (Interviewer)

Feldman, Isaac (Videographer)

## Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews  
Weems, Carrie Mae, 1953---Interviews

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## Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

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The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

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## Occupations:

Visual Artist

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## HistoryMakers® Category:

ArtMakers

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## Administrative Information

### Custodial History

Interview footage was recorded by The HistoryMakers®. All rights to the interview have been transferred to The HistoryMakers® by the interview subject through a signed interview release form. Signed interview release forms have been deposited with Jenner & Block, LLP, Chicago.

### Preferred Citation

The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Carrie Mae Weems, September 10, 2014. The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection, 1900 S. Michigan Avenue, Chicago, Illinois.

### Processing Information

This interview collection was processed and encoded on 5/30/2023 by The HistoryMakers® staff. The finding aid was created adhering to the following standards: DACS, AACR2, and the Oral History Cataloging Manual (Matters 1995).

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## Other Finding Aid

A Microsoft Access contact database and a FileMaker Pro tracking database, both maintained by The HistoryMakers®, keep track of the administrative functions involved in scheduling, researching, and producing the interview.

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## Detailed Description of the Collection

## Series I: Original Interview Footage

Video Oral History Interview with Carrie Mae Weems, Section A2014\_175\_001\_001, TRT: 1:28:11 ?

Carrie Mae Weems was born on April 20, 1953 in Portland, Oregon to Carrie Polk Weems and Myrlie Weems. Her maternal great-grandmother, Bessie Mullen, worked as a sharecropper in Clarksdale, Mississippi. She raised fourteen children, including Weems' maternal grandmother, Ozzie Mullen Polk. Weems' grandmother married Elbert Polk, who had Jewish ancestry and could pass for white. They too worked as sharecroppers in Clarksdale, and raised eleven children, including Weems' mother. Nearby, Weems' paternal family were sharecroppers on a white-owned plantation. Several of Weems' paternal uncles and maternal aunts were married prior to her parents' marriage in Clarksdale. Then, Weems' maternal great aunt, Avie Mullen Smith, moved west to Oregon. She was followed by Weems' maternal grandparents, their children and nearly two hundred members of the Polk and Mullen families. Weems' parents settled in a majority-black neighborhood in Portland, Oregon, where they worked for her maternal grandfather's janitorial business.

Video Oral History Interview with Carrie Mae Weems, Section A2014\_175\_001\_002, TRT: 2:28:46 ?

Carrie Mae Weems grew up in a predominantly black neighborhood in Portland, Oregon, where she was the second oldest of six children. From the age of five years old, Weems picked beans, strawberries and corn during the summer to supplement her family's income. In the winter, she worked for her maternal grandfather's janitorial service. Weems began her education at the Eliot Elementary School in Portland, where she was influenced by her African American first grade teacher, Ms. Russell. When she was in the second grade, her family moved to a predominantly white community of farmworkers, where Weems studied at the integrated Sabin Elementary School. From eleven years old, Weems was interested in dance, theater and painting, and aspired to become an artist. She continued her education at Boise Elementary School, and then attended the majority-white Andrew Jackson High School. At fourteen years old, Weems was recruited by a teacher to join the summer theater program at the private Catlin Gabel School.

Video Oral History Interview with Carrie Mae Weems, Section A2014\_175\_001\_003, TRT: 3:31:13 ?

Carrie Mae Weems attended the summer theater program at the Catlin Gabel School in Portland, Oregon, where she befriended a white classmate named Catherine Jelski. At sixteen years old, Weems gave birth to her daughter, Faith Weems Jackson. After graduating from high school, she moved with Jelski to San Francisco, California, where they joined the San Francisco Dancers' Workshop, which was led by Anna Halprin. In the early 1970s, Weems had apartments in both San Francisco and New York City, and worked as a secretary through the Kelly Services, Inc. In San Francisco, she was introduced to Marxism by her boyfriend, Raymond Marshall, and became politically conscious. Marshall also introduced Weems to photography, and gave her a Nikomat camera. Aspiring to capture the authentic black experience, Weems enrolled in photography classes at the City College of San Francisco. During this time, she read Joe Crawford's 'The Black Photographers Annual,' and was inspired by the work of contributors like Dawoud Bey.

Video Oral History Interview with Carrie Mae Weems, Section A2014\_175\_001\_004, TRT: 4:27:30 ?

Carrie Mae Weems studied under black photographers Dawoud Bey and Frank Stewart at the Studio Museum in Harlem during the late 1970s. She was influenced by the artists at the Kamoinge Workshop, and was mentored by photographer Roy DeCarava, who was the collective's leader. During this time, Weems also worked as a studio assistant to black photographers Louis Draper and Anthony Barboza. Then, she enrolled at the California Institute of the Arts in Valencia, where she photographed black farmers in Central California. In the early 1980s, Weems produced and curated exhibitions of black female photography at institutions like the Brockman Gallery in Los Angeles, California, where she met painter Kerry James Marshall and curator Deborah Willis. She went on to produce solo exhibitions for artists like Shawn Walker, and forged connections at museums and galleries where she was later invited to show her work. During this time, Weems also produced a film about Roy DeCarava and the Kamoinge Workshop.

Video Oral History Interview with Carrie Mae Weems, Section A2014\_175\_001\_005, TRT: 5:30:53 ?

Carrie Mae Weems traveled to Alabama in 1982 to conduct an oral history interview of black portrait artist P.H. Polk. She then enrolled at the University of California, San Diego in La Jolla, California. While there, she created her first film project, which documented black photographers like Roy DeCarava and Lorna Simpson. During this time, Weems read Zora Neale Hurston's 'Their Eyes Were Watching God.' She was inspired by the power of personal narrative in the story, which informed her first collection of photographs and text, 'Family Pictures and Stories, 1981-1982.' She graduated in 1984, and then enrolled in the folklore graduate program at the University of California, Berkeley, where she studied under the noted folklorist Alan Dundes. While there, Weems curated the collection 'Ain't Jokin', 1987-1988.' After graduating in 1987, she taught at Hampshire College in Amherst, Massachusetts, where she created the text and photo series 'American Icons, 1988-1989' and 'The Kitchen Table Series, 1990.'

Video Oral History Interview with Carrie Mae Weems, Section A2014\_175\_001\_006, TRT: 6:31:25 ?

Carrie Mae Weems moved to Northampton, Massachusetts to teach photography at Hampshire College. While there, she created the 'American Icons, 1988-1989' photo series, which highlighted the prevalence of racist stereotypes about African Americans by calling attention to black memorabilia in everyday settings. She also created the text and photograph compilation 'The Kitchen Table Series, 1990.' The series was composed of photographs of Weems and other subjects seated around her kitchen table, and explored the themes of black female identity and relationships. At this point in the interview, Weems talks about the representation of women in portraiture, and the exclusion of African Americans from critical art discourse. Weems also talks about the history of misrepresentation of the black female body in art, which led her to use exclusively her own body as the subject of her photographs; as a vehicle for depicting the black experience; and as a site of confrontation.