Carrie Mae Weems was born in Portland, Oregon on April 22, 1953, the second of seven children. At the age of 12, she learned photography from her father, who was also a black-and-white photographer. She received her first camera when she was 14 and began photographing her family and friends. In 1971, she moved to New York to seek mentorship with photographers. While working as a secretary, Weems photographed the historical images from these archives for this project without securing permission from the institutions that held them. She then increased the size of the images and to the subject of the image. “When reading the entire series from left to right, the viewer is able to see the progression and the narrative around an unnamed character—played by the artist—and her lived experience in relation to her surroundings.”

Weems created the series From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried (1981–1982), is a series of thirty-one red-tinted images that reference the history of racist stereotypes in Sambo images. In this series, Weems explored what it means to be a subject in the context of American society and history. From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried is a narrative around an unnamed character—played by the artist—and her lived experience in relation to her surroundings. The artist describes this series as a “biography of the black woman.”

Throughout her career, Carrie Mae Weems has created work that engages historical and cultural narratives and representations of race and identity. Her use of photography to explore social and cultural issues is evident in her work, which often challenges and re-contextualizes the ways in which black women have been depicted in visual art. Weems’s work is characterized by its exploration of race, gender, and identity, and its ability to make complex social issues accessible to a wide audience.

Discussion Questions

How does Carrie Mae Weems give her subjects power?

What role does text play in Weems’ work?

Why does Weems act as a “silent witness” to historical trauma?

Describe how Weems confronts racism in her work. Why is that important?

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DESCENDING THE THRONE YOU BECAME FOOT SOLDIER & COOK