[DRAFT] FUTURE MEMORY: SPACE, MONUMENTALITY AND IMAGES OF BLACKNESS

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"If we were a people much given to revealing secrets, we might raise monuments and sacrifice to the memories of our poets, but slavery cured us of that weakness. It may be enough, however, to have it said that we survive in exact relationship to the dedication of our poets (include preachers, musicians, and blues singers),"[1] wrote the late Maya Angelou. It is a quote that has appeared in several of my writings about the creative evocations of collective memory and history within African American cultural practices. For Angelou it is the cadence of spoken word—stanzas, scats, and call and response—rather than the frozen figuration of stone and bronze that reveals the past, its "secrets." The history of black America is not told in its architecture, but in its temporal patterns of oratory. This was not because black Americans did not build. First enduring enslavement, followed by the spatial policing of Jim Crow segregation, black Americans could never claim space in order to erect monumental forms of civic and cultural architecture—except perhaps within segregated neighborhoods or in a temporary fashion. It is the latter transient buildings that led me to what were called *Negro Buildings*—temporary exhibition halls at expositions—where black Americans represented who they were and how they imagined themselves to be. This "counter public sphere" took shape out of a diminution of economic, social and political rights and equal access under white supremacy. These counter-public spaces existed for days,

weeks and on occasion months before they were dismantled and carted away. Enmeshed in a vast diaspora produced through voluntary and forced migrations, recollections of the past traveled with people as they journeyed from place to place. I approach the Dia's provocation of *Monuments, Monumentality and Monumentalization* in this series of public discussions through first a consideration of African American monuments, in particular those dedicated to Frederick Douglass. Followed by a close reading of the work of the artist Carrie Mae Weems, in particular her series of photographs of monuments in Rome. [say something here about black monuments and photography as a form of monument] What interests me is whose significations of history does the monument evoke in its process of recuperating the past? In social space of the modern city, how and who does the monument address? Does racial difference, which is fundamental for to whom history produces it's meaning be recalibrated in the space-time affect of the monument?

SIGNIFYING BLACKNESS

Figures of Africans have appeared in European sculpture for centuries—the Moor and the allegorical muse Africa populate paintings and sculptures. In the United States and England nineteenth century abolitionist statues have featured prone figures of unchained enslaved men and women to champion the cause of emancipation. One of the first monuments of an African American figure was dedicated to Frederick Douglass and erected in the city of Rochester, New York where the abolitionist had lived for twenty-five years and where he was buried in 1895. Sculpted by Sidney Lewis the

bronze monument was unveiled four years after Douglass's death to an audience of black and white civic leaders. Through his fiery speeches calling for the end of slavery that had been published widely, by the time of his death Douglass and his likeness were well known.

His figure had appeared, for example, on the pediment of the first Negro Building designed by white New York architect Bradford Gilbert for the Atlanta Cotton States and International Exposition in 1895. The exposition is best known as the national venue where a young industrial training school head named Booker T. Washington delivered his famous "Atlanta Compromise" speech. The sage of Tuskegee rocketed to the national prominence, a position once held by the recently deceased Douglass, by advising black Americans to continue to dutifully labor for white employers, who paid them less than white workers. Washington also advised his fellow black citizens to be patient and accommodating to the rising animosity and vengeance emanating from the ranks of their fellow white citizens. Douglass's bas-relief figure cast in white staff on the Negro Building's pediment represented the future of the race—learned, respectable, and industrious. Douglass's robust countenance was juxtaposed next to unkempt Mammy figure symbolizing the history of the race as feminized, illiterate and disempowered. Once its displays of machine engines, needlepoint samples, and other evidence of industrial training had been shipped back to Southern schools and associations, the ten thousand square foot Negro Building was torn down at the close of the fair in early 1896.

The likeness of Douglass would also appear in other expositions. In the "American Negro Exhibit" at Paris's *Exposition Universelle* in 1900, a maquette of the Douglass monument in Rochester was prominently displayed within the exhibition. A part of the American contribution to the Pavilion of Social Economy, the exhibition featured an extensive catalogue of black American progress, including co-curator W.E.B. Du Bois' award winning Georgia Negro sociological study. A benchmark of racial progress, the Douglass monument represented an international audience that the American Negro had a history and a culture—contrary to the degrading stereotypes represented elsewhere on the exposition grounds. The "American Negro Exhibition" with the Douglass monument would travel to world's fairs in Buffalo and Charleston.

By referencing and monumentalizing the figure and the accomplishments of Douglass, black citizens countered Euro-American perception that the Negro the lacked the capacity to contribute meaningfully to the advancement of the nation. To black Americans—just forty years post-Emancipation—his figure provoked a reconsideration of Douglass's demands for emancipation and equal treatment, rights that had yet to be granted to the nation's thousands of former slaves. Douglass had dared to chastise white Americans that the "hypocrisy of the nation must be exposed." He chided: "What to the American slave is the Fourth of July?"[2] The Douglass monuments in their various forms—full scale monument and its copy—did what historian Genevievè Fabre suggests emerged from black commemorative practices that were "not just memory of past

events but memory of the future, in anticipation of action to come." Thus we can understand the Douglass monument as a political act meant to evoke "historical consciousness" as Fabre suggests "of a people who are often perceived as victims rather than historical agents"[3] (Fabre 72-73). The heroic Douglass monuments did not signify past events, but were meant to evoke for future ones yet to happen.

A former slave, Douglass's tiring activism before, during, and after the Civil War made him a celebrated or reviled figure depending on what region of the country one traveled. He was however a widely recognized figure because of the numerous engravings and photographs that circulated widely.[4] (PP41) Douglass was also keenly aware of the possibilities of the new technology of photography and gave several lectures on the topic. In 1861 Douglass delivered a lecture titled "Pictures and Progress" (1861) where he argued that photography could depict the black man as he really was rather than how whites imagined him to be—referencing the degrading and exaggerated depictions of dancing coons, mammies, boogie men and hottentots appearing in print media, on products, and at entertainment venues.[5] Douglass saw the tool of photography as a powerful medium of self-representation observing that "Men of all conditions may see themselves as others see them. What was once the exclusive luxury of the rich and great is now within reach of all." (PP 6). What Douglass astutely recognized (as would Du Bois) was that these new technologies would be accessible by what was becoming known as the "masses"—the growing population of cities that were becoming linked via telegraphic technologies. Through photography Douglass's

visibility and that of his cause to end persistent racial violence and inequality operated on a monumental scale with many black Americans purchasing pictures of Douglass to hang in the homes and businesses. Cultural historian Deborah Willis would observe in the work of the photographers that Du Bois employed to compile documentation for the *Georgia Negro Study* that: "photography played a role in shaping people's ideas about identity and sense of self." According to Willis photography "informed African American social consciousness and motivated black people by offering an 'other' view of the black subject. In a sense photography was used as what I call 'subversive resistance.'"[6]

WITNESSING HISTORY

A woman donning a long back dress stands with her back to the camera. Perfectly still, she stands near Rome's Pyramid of *Caius Cestius*, which dates back 18 – 12 B.C. when it was erected as a tomb for a powerful magistrate and former governor of the Roman Province of Egypt, hence the pyramidal form. Dwarfed by the scale of her surroundings, the unidentified woman is pointed towards the *Porta San Paolo*, a large gateway flanked by two crenellated cylindrical towers stitched into the 3rd century Aurelian walls of Rome. Originally called the *Porta Ostensias,* the gate marked a southern entry of the road from Ostia into the city. Other historical moments are also rendered visible. In this *mise-en-scène* the older (perhaps 19th century) cobblestone street abuts the more recent asphalt edge the roadway. Both surfaces have been painted over by cross-hatching markers that orchestrate pedestrian movement through the busy intersection

of the Piazzale Ostiense—still a crossroads as it was in ancient times. Vehicles are parked just near the base of Caius Cestius tomb. The large black and white photograph, one mounted eye height at 73" tall by 62" wide also marks time, captures a moment in the past that like a monument which also marks a moment in the past. Both can evoke a memory. But as a reproduction the photograph as object may not bear what Benjamin identified as "authenticity" in order for it to function as a time machine proper—what art historian Alois Riegl catalogued as "age value."

The photograph *Pyramids of Rome—Ancient Rome*, is from the series *Roaming* by artist Carrie Mae Weems. As a viewer we see what she sees. Weems is in fact the woman in black standing in the image. We witness "history" or perhaps more accurately "histories" that relate a sense of time; that narrate and represent past events or phenomena. The juxtaposition of these monuments—the travertine pyramid and the brick and stone gatehouse—mark different moments in the architectural and urban history of Rome. The automobiles, the street markings, and the figure of the women in the photograph also mark the present, or at least at the time when the photograph was taken. It is in the viewing the photograph that the present moment is marked. Rather than an object in space, suggests architectural theorist Mark Wigley, "the monument is a preserve for time." Monuments evoke memory "by holding a previous time against the flow of the present." Monuments, for Wigley are in essence "time machines." The longevity of the pyramid and gate, their age, but also their juxtaposition conjured in viewers an awareness of the past; particularly for those in the Renaissance who

developed a keen interest in "antiquity," whose study evolved into the formal disciplines of archaeology and art history by the 18th and 19th centuries. Topographer Guiseppe Vasi, for example, included an engraving of the pyramid and gate in the first book of his mid-18th century *Delle Magnificenze di Roma*—a primer on ancient sites that were popular along the Grand Tour embarkened upon by the European aristocracy who were eager to gaze upon what was being claimed their shared cultural patrimony. Vasi's peer Giambattista Piranesi also included the Pyramid of Cestius—in his depiction overgrown and sublimely overscaled—as part of his engravings of Rome in various stages of ruination. [One might say that Piranesi's Rome is a time machine where the past subsumes all present moments.] In both engravings figures—some with their backs to the viewer—gaze in wonderment at these sentinels of antiquity. For the 18th century viewer the site and also the engravings of these two *historical* monuments made the passing of time visible but more importantly rendered the events of history—*knowable*. Monuments institutionalize, Wigley observes "a certain sense of time" in the viewing subject whose capacity for recollection *synchronizes* the past with the present. (Wigley 36) The woman in black, but also we (the viewers) witness history in the making. My favorite example of how a circuit of memory works, in this instance one whose calibration of synchronizing past and present is off-kilter, appears is in Christopher Nolan's film *Memento.* The protagonist or antagonist Lenny whose amnesia renders him incapable of developing new memories, relies on portable *pneumonic* devices—maps, notes, and tattoos to discern truth from fiction. For me what is remarkable about *Memento* is the non-descript and unmemorable architecture of the

hotel rooms, diners, doctor's offices, and bungalows along Lenny's journey—these are places that evoke forgetting.

Weems's *Roaming* series captures her at the threshold of several monuments of architecture, art, and landscape in Rome and around Southern Italy—including several at the ancient hill town town of Matera. Other photographs in the series related to ancient sites show Weems at the northern gate of Aurelian wall inside *Piazza del Popolo* gazing at the *Basilica Santa Maria del Popolo*. Piranesi and Vasi also depicted the Piazza. Weems not only traverses the history of the city, but also the history of art. Although not visible in Weems's photograph, in the center of the *Piazza* sits the Egyptian Obelisk of Ramesses brought to the city by the emperor Augustus. In the chain of significations of history the monument to a powerful Pharaoh is claimed as tribute of a Roman Emperor that eventually becomes a testament to the Pontifical power that remade Rome in the image of the imperial ambitions of the Catholic Church. In an interview about the series Weems pointedly observes that "Architecture in its essence, is very much about power."

The other photographs of the *Roaming* series are titled "Mussolini's Rome." These show monuments to other regimes of power in Rome's long history. Weems's wanders through EUR or E42, the site of the *Esposizione Universale Roma* (Universal Exposition of Rome) commissioned by fascist Prime Minister Benito Mussolini for 1942. The Italian government erected the buildings in the period following WWII. She stands in front of

the *Palazzo De Congressi- Hall of Congress.* She walks toward the equestrian statue adjacent to what was called the *Hall of Italian Civilization* renamed the *Hall of the Worker*. These images within the series make clear Weems's critique of architecture and monumentality where one feels as Weems characterized it: "the power of the State in relationship to the lower subject, the general populace." "You are always aware" Weems says "that you are a minion in relationship to enormous edifice. The edifice of power." Fundamental to the monuments of Rome within Weems's photographic *derive* is the representation of power and the marking of time as history through the monument. Weems queries: "What is this relationship of power to you and what is your relationship to power? And how do you contest it?"

The monument is a recurrent theme, although an understudied one, in Weems's body of work. She is best known for her *Kitchen Table* series (1990) where she uses a kitchen table to stage domestic performances around the themes of gender, sexuality, family and community within black America. Weems performs various social roles in these tableaux of everyday life. The insertion texts within the series introduces another cadence to the series, a voice track of sorts, in the form of what curator and critic Franklin Sirmans identifies as "poetic writing that recalls the vernacular and oral narration" in the work of writers such as Zora Neale Hurston. This series was followed by ones on the *Sea Islands* (1991-92), *Africa* (1993) and the *Slave Coast* (1993) where Weems photographed the architecture of the points of capture, departure, embarkation and settlement within the sphere of Atlantic slave trade. While these

photographs possess an ethnographic tinge on first encounter, Weems's counters this quality through textual insertions that enunciate other possible histories. When viewed together these three series stitch together the geo-political space of the trade in human flesh that filled the coffers of emergent nation-states, fueled the industry generating the wealth of Europe and the Americas, and produced the significations of racial difference that enabled modernity's narratives of Progress and Civilization. Working more directly with the subject of monuments, Weems photographed in 2000 monuments around the U.S., including the gleaming white Soldier's National Monument (1874) on the battlefield of Gettysburg and the towering bronze equestrian monument to revolutionary war hero George Washington that sits on the grounds of Thomas Jefferson's Virginia Statehouse in Richmond. These "intentional monuments," to use one of Riegl's term here, were erected to remind the public of the necessity and sacrifices war. Her rendering of these historical monuments within their messy everyday urban contexts and national park setting mutes the signification of the patriarchal power and the violence that built and sustains the space of the nation-state. Weems's almost deadpan approach neutralizes the bellicose figuration of these monumental ensembles—she mutes the synchronizing emergence of the past in relation the present.

Monuments and their multiple forms of intentionality were assessed by Austrian art history Alois Riegl in his essay "The Modern Cult of Monuments," written in 1903. First editor of its journal and then member of the Central Commission for Research and

Preservation of Artistic and Historical Monuments, Riegl undertook the lengthy theoretical analysis to comprehend the various social and cultural implications of preserving historic buildings and monuments. (Gubser 141) In a deliberately developmental framework, Riegl traced how Europeans understood the past, in particular during the Italian Renaissance when monuments were noticed, notated and valued. Riegl charts the development of three forms of commemorative values—historical value, age value, and intentional commemorative value. First recognized in the Renaissance "Historical Value," object valuation was determined by a monument's state of preservation—its ability to resist decay and disfiguration. Historical valuation feeds the production of knowledge about art history and culture and it is the purview of the learned scholar. A second later more modern form of valuation is "Age Value" wherein the past is made evident through the material decay of a monument or it "rests in the obvious perception of these traces." Age value "lays claim to mass appeal". (Riegl 31) "Age value" has always informed "historical value" contributing to theories of development where one epoch and style could be traced as proceeding or following another. Third, "Intentional Commemorative Value," for Riegl is the most modern—a synthesis of age and historical value that "aims to preserve a moment in the consciousness of later generations, and therefore remain alive and present in perpetuity." The past in these types of monuments remains in an "eternal present" or as Riegl writes in "an unceasing state of becoming" requiring continual restoration against the forces of time. (Riegl 38) It is through the arresting of the perceptual passage of time that enables the viewing subject to recall and know an historical event,

the synchronizing affect of the monument. Thus the monument is always *modern*, argues Wigley, because of its temporal circuiting of past in present, which also gives rise to what Riegl described as "newness value." Because the unfolding of time is foundational to Riegl's assessment of the modern monument steeped in nineteenth century notions of progress, culture, and history all of which were produced through the category of the racial and racial difference.

WITNESS OF HISTORY

The other trope utilized in the *Roaming* series—that of the witness—can be found in Weems's series the *Louisiana Project* (2003), *Beacon* (2005) and the ongoing *The Museum* series. Scholars have compared the use of the figure in these series to Casper David Friedrich's *Wanderer Above a Sea of Fog* (1818) [find reference]. Friedrich's unnamed European man gazes outward across a landscape that is visibly vast but also cloaked under the fog. It cannot be seen or known, but the view is nonetheless beautiful or in the Kantian sense aesthetically pleasing. Art historian Antoine Picon suggests that at this moment landscape, territory and also historiography shared a perspective based upon "an estrangement from immediate experience." (Picon 97) According to theorist Denise Da Silva, the transcendental "being of things in the world" emerging from Enlightenment philosophy captured "a temporality of the knowing subject, acquiring their own historicity." (Da Silva 68) Again I want to emphasize the emergence of a sense of being in time, in history. As a photographic sequence—an almost cinematic one akin to Chris Marker's *Le Jetee*—we follow Weems on her *derive* through the city

and through various epochs of time. Her photographs operate as a monument of time/space—a future memory, a subjectivity that is still in the process of becoming within what theorist Da Silva has identified as Europe's onto-epistemological frameworks of history (the interior realm of the modern self-conscious subject) and representation (the exterior space of the world). The monument evokes not only the memory, but also it also requires that the viewing subject engage the significations evoked by the monument's narrative of history. In other words it constitutes the subject within history—as a time machine it places the viewing subject in time. Da Silva cogently argues that this modern subject is both "producer and product and cause and effect—an effect of both scientific and historical signification." For Da Silva Europe's the significations of history are productive of the universal humanist subject, but it also required the space of colonial encounter to produce difference signified in rational discourse of science—i.e. anthropology, racial science and so forth. Weems's early series *From Where I Saw What Happened and Cried* (1995), for example, appropriated, the mid 19th century daguerreotypes of slaves taken by J.T. Zealy for biologist and geographer Luis Agassiz to use in his research on racial typologies. (Wallis 104) Agassiz's produced knowledge on racial difference that boosted national claims that the intellectually superior Europeans (and by racial stock Americans) would lead civilization's vanguard while the inferior primitive Africans (including Negroes), Asians, and Native American's would labor in the world's rearguard. Weems's recalibration of the light and colors and her reframing of the images "humanized" the object of the scientific gaze. Represented in the Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment periods as

primitive, ignorant, illiterate, and asexual can history conveyed through monumentality be signified through the subjectivity a black woman?

History, particularly in its post-Enlightenment representation, enables the formation of a modern subject—one that is no longer a subject of the church or the monarchy. In her rigorous review of modern epistemology from Descarte/Locke/Kant/Hegel/Herder/Darwin to contemporary theorists of race, ethnicity, and subalternity, Da Silva concerns herself with how the play of reason in these modern texts brings the *thinking* subject into representation through history and science. (30) This begins for instance with Descartes' "I think therefore I am," a form of subjectivity—self-consciousness and self-determination—radically different from one governed by God will's or the will of the King or Queen. Found in the comparative evidence of racial difference made possible by colonial encounters, this rational presentation of human difference—minds who think and bodies who labor—produces spaces of regulation and representation during the Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment period. For example, Riegl's Austrian citizenry and European audience, those who might have traveled the Grand Tour, visited the Exposition grounds of Paris or London or journeyed to the colonies of the Empire, held a worldview (one might say a birds-eye-view) that exceeded the geographical boundaries of Europe. The centuries of colonial encounter were productive of the self-determined and self-conscious modern subject. Da Silva strategically fuses racial subjection with global subjection in order to "demonstrate how the productive weapons of reason, the tools of history and

science, institute both man and his others as global-historical beings." (intro 19) One example of global-historical subjection can be observed in how the racial works (as history) to allow the conqueror to understand himself as being in a different time than the so-called natives he encounters. He records his encounter as a history that documents the rates at which different civilizations have advanced. The racial also operates through the tools of science such that the conqueror as a European can survey and map, and thus represent himself in the space of encounter as some place different than "Europe's others." Thus beginning in the mid-nineteenth century Europe (and in different but parallel ways in the United States) the racial becomes one an effective means of establishing social hierarchies through knowledge of the universal signifier of Mankind. Modern systems of representation such as treatises architecture and drawings that deploy reason productively were fundamental to the sciences that regulate exteriority (things in the world) and to history that regulates interiority (self-consciousness). Comparative methods of form and evolution used in the biological sciences were adopted in architecture to determine differences in building function and style. Thus the history of courthouses or triumphal arches could be known and adapted to signification regimes of power for emergent nation-states in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Carrie Mae Weems's *Roaming* is a powerful work that engages the architecture of the monument—its signifying capacity of history and power and ability to produce the viewing subject. The repetitious appearance of the figure in all of her large

photographs—one that echoes the a cadence of walking, where she goes we follow—imbues the image with the pressure of time, with what philosopher Gilles Deleuze describes as being "what is specific of the image, as soon as it is creative, is to make perceptible, to make visible relationships of time which cannot be seen in the represented object and do not allow themselves to be reduced to the present." [expand here] That pressure is toward not yet seen, toward a future memory.

CODA: Weem's recent exhibition *Three Decades of Photography and Video* at the Guggenheim Museum—itself a monument to modern architecture, modern art, an institution that has shaped modern art and architectural historiography—was the first solo exhibition by an African American woman.

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[1] Maya Angelou, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings,* (New York: Random House, 1969), 179.
[2] Frederick Douglass, "The Hypocrisy of American Slavery,"
[3] Genevieve Fabre and Robert O'Meally eds., History and Memory in African American Culture, (Oxford: University of Oxford Press, 1994)
[4] *Pictures and Progress: Early Photography and the Making of African American Identity*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012)
[5] There was even a movement amongst whites in the South beginning around fiftieth anniversary of Emancipation to erect a large "Black Mammy" monument on the National Mall—an homage to a Southern institution lost with after the Civil War.
[6] David Levering Lewis and Deborah Willis, eds. A Small Nation of People: W.E.B. Du Bois and Black Americans at the Turn of the Century. (Washington, DC: Library of Congress, 2003),55