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Carrie Mae Weems' intersectional tropes: engaging black feminism within arts teacher education

Montserrat Rifà-Valls and Sara López

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In this article, we approach the visual tropes in Carrie Mae Weems' bodies from an intersectional perspective through mobilising critical arts and black feminist studies for art pedagogies. A constant in Weems' trajectory are the intersectional tropes that emerge in her artworks, which are collapsed with bodies, defying racial, gender, age, and social class stereotypes, stratification, and oppression. Aiming to engage black feminism with pedagogies, we revisit a critical art project that connects different spaces: the exhibition "Carrie Mae Weems: A Great Turn in the Possible"; and, a pre-service art teacher education course - "Childhoods: Inclusive narratives through art" - where narrative is a mode of decolonising pedagogy through contemporary art. First, we will examine the topics and strategies practised by five students' micro-groups dealing with the critical and dialogical analysis of the intersectional tropes in Weems' series. Second, we will reconstruct the process that has been conducted to transform and transfer that knowledge into educational spaces and resources designed to perform a feminist, intercultural, and social justice-oriented art education. Finally, the article discusses how critical pedagogy merges with critical arts to train future art educators while experimenting with a black feminist curriculum.

Keywords: visual tropes; intersectional perspective; critical pedagogy; black visual culture; feminist decolonial curriculum

1. Prelude. Creating synergies between spaces

In the autumn of 2022, aiming to engage black feminism with pedagogies, a critical art project connected different cultural and pedagogical spaces. This article interprets and discusses the synergies between Carrie Mae Weems' exhibition and higher education through narrative research by focusing on the contribution of critical arts for a pedagogy

of transgression (hooks, 1994). It also explores how the trope, read from the perspective of intersectionality, contributes to critical analysis and reappropriation of the artist's narratives in the context of teacher education. To explore the intersection between black feminism, critical arts, and pedagogy, we will report on the knowledge that emerges between the visual tropes, intersectionality, and the pedagogical reflections provided by university students. This art pedagogical project fosters social awareness and educational transformation through a dialogical analysis of artistic works, followed by designing educational spaces or resources to address inclusion in the classroom.

On the one hand, there were the spaces of the exhibition "Carrie Mae Weems: A Great Turn in the Possible" in Barcelona (KBr, Fotocolectania, and MACBA Chapel) (1), curated by Elvira Dyangani Ose, who positioned herself in visual arts, postcolonial studies, and feminism to rethink museum practices. This multi-located exhibition entailed a reflection on black feminism and critical arts from a relational standpoint between communities, bodies, and knowledge. Working within critical arts, Carrie Mae Weems' projects consist of narrating untold and invisible stories – through photography, performance, or film – and situating them in the public sphere to challenge and subvert the oppressions of race and gender (Dyangani Ose, 2022).

On the other hand, there were the emotional, material, and discursive spaces of the student teachers enrolled in "Childhoods: Inclusive narratives through art," which is a subject of Early Childhood and Primary Education degrees (Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona) (2). Through intertwining the students' itineraries with Carrie Mae Weems' exhibition, we aimed to explore narrative as a mode of decolonising pedagogy and the concept of childhood through contemporary art. With the exercise of interpreting trope orientations in Weems' pieces within higher education spaces, we address subjectivity, childhood, racism, activism, and history to experiment with a pedagogy of transgression

(hooks, 1994). Concretely, to provoke the entanglement of spaces, we developed several resources to discuss the following topics and strategies with undergraduate students:

- (1) The representation disrupted [irony and recontextualization];
- (2) Subjectivity and memory [elision/visibility, repetition/suppression];
- (3) Between care and violence [counter-stories, biographical inscription/collapse, resistance];
- (4) Against racism, activism! [reframing, relating, fighting]; and
- (5) The power of popular culture [reinterpreting, constructing, performing].

Our purpose is to discuss how art, in this case, Weems' art, can be used to decolonise pedagogy and enrich both the artistic and educational spheres in relation to social and cultural complexities.

Born in 1953, Carrie Mae-Weems, was trained as both a dancer and a photographer, and began to move between popular culture, critical arts, and social sciences methods in the 1980s (Ryan, 2021). To start with, we introduced the artist to the students with an excerpt where she reveals who inspires her (Weems, 2015): Tony Morrison, Laura Mulvey, Leo Tolstoy, Alice Walker, Pina Bausch, Nina Simone, Roy DeCarava, Diane Arbus, Duchamp, Félix González-Torres, Anna Mendieta and Mickalene Thomas, amongst others. The room dedicated to the *Kitchen Table* series (1990) in FotoColectania provided a visual autobiographical account of how she makes decisions, what causes emotions, and what is tolerable and what is not. In this narrative, she embodies "the difficulty of reconciling her as a woman-lover-mother-friend-family-daughter-partner-artist, and the causes of her discomfort, which is her vindication as a woman artist who wants to travel, who wants to produce, who wants to dedicate herself of doing artwork" (Teacher, S4).

Weems (2015) herself has also reflected on being engaged in critical arts and pedagogy for social justice. Therefore, it is relevant to highlight to the students the role of artistic figures for social and educational transformation. Specifically, exploring how Weems' work translates into pedagogical strategies will inspire students to consider new ways of approaching teaching and learning. At the same time, integrating critical arts into education promotes a broader understanding of social, cultural, and racial issues. The visual strategies of engagement in the work of Carrie Mae Weems have been described respectively as an anticolonial project that decentres, questions and displaces whiteness (hooks, 1995a; Raymond, 2014; Gander, 2020); as black public art based on a dynamical model that fights for social justice and pluralises black experiences (Pena, 2019); as a critical deconstruction of the master narratives of history and the racialised hegemonies of vision (Lyndernberg, 2018); and as the arduous task of reconstructing and making visible the forgotten and marginalised stories of black subjects (Dyangani Ose, 2022).

The pedagogical effects of Carrie Mae Weems have been experienced by herself in *Constructing History* (2008) and *Operation: Activate* (2011). Frederic and Patel (2018) have conceived Weems' art as pedagogical interventions to destabilise voyeurism with students. In the initial phase of our project, we proposed to carry out a dialogical analysis of a set of works from the artist's exhibition. This was done in connection to various readings assigned to groups of students. Subsequently, we focused on designing an educational space or resource to address art education in an inclusive way. During this journey, we considered narrative self-investigation to be essential, as it allows us to intertwine the stories of students, as future teachers who investigate and learn to teach, with the narratives about blackness that Weems addresses in her works. Finally, narrative was presented as a reflexive and visual strategy, similar to the one used by Weems in her art.

Considering teachers-as-researchers, we have designed, developed, and critically analysed the art education project. We recorded and transcribed all the lessons (S1 to S6, twenty hours), collected the students' deliberations and assignments, photographed, and filmed all the encounters and art creations, and codified the students' voices. One of us was a participant observer and supported the teacher responsible for the subject and the students' processes. Since documenting is part of the training and will become a critical reflexive strategy for the future teachers in their classes with children, we obtained the oral consent at the beginning, and it was ratified in each activity. Accordingly, sharing our diaries as teachers-as-researchers kept the reflections alive. The article hypothesises that both critical arts –the understanding of art as transformative practices– and critical pedagogies –the understanding of curriculum as emancipatory learning processes– share a dialogical approach that tackles difference (Slattery, Krasny and O'Malley, 2007). Based on critical arts, we reflect on the significant implications of black feminist decolonial approaches for developing more inclusive and participatory pedagogical methods.

2. Visual tropes, intersectionality, and narrative inquiry

In general, the concept of trope is defined doubly. First, the trope is a recurrent topic with a particular meaning in communication, arts, and literature, based on the repetition and recognition of an idea, sentence or image, which serves to portray a convention or a *cliché*, like "the racist tropes". Either as cartoons or memes, these "tropes of intolerance" produce discrimination that "takes on the properties of a processual phenomenon, which one act building upon an earlier one. Often it starts with a stereotype, a generalised image of some group and its members" (Rose, 2021, 6). As Rose has argued, the socialisation of prejudices, stigmatisation and blaming provokes segregation, exclusion and violence

operating on the politics of fear that emerges from the hybridisation of racism, ethnocentrism, and nationalism (see, e.g. Chavez, 2021; Breazu & McGarry, 2023).

Second, in rhetoric, the trope is a device or a way to employ words in a different direction than its ordinary meaning with creativity and imagination, like "the tropes of mask and the mother" in forming black subjectivity (Wright, 2004). Other Afro-American artists have also critically experimented with tropes, such as two artists that Weems admires, Lorna Simpson and Adrian Piper, who play with women's "hair as a trope for blackness" (Wright, 2004). Our article uses both interpretations of the trope, even if they seem opposed. Tropes contribute to the "conditions of possibility" of narrative as a cultural phenomenon (Bal, 1985), where the textual description is the basis for multiple interpretations.

By approaching the trope as constitutive of narrative, we will conceptualise it as "a change of orientation or deviation; a resource or expression that replaces another term" (extract from the course materials). Tropes have been studied in social life to critically analyse the construction and circulation of racial stereotypes and discrimination (Smith, 2019; Rose, 2021). Carry Mae Weems experiments with those orientations and deviations that tropes generate; she plays with representation to contest the edges of racism using metaphor, allegory, or hyperbole as visual tactics. As Gander (2020) has sustained, following Sara Ahmed (2006) and based on Fanon, Weems engages in a "visual politics that shifts what hooks calls 'the starting point,' to reverse viewing hierarchies: the phenomenological orientations of whiteness become the subject of the picture; the position of the black body becomes the 'standpoint'" (Gander, 2020, 524). According to this, the reorientation devices work as means of disorientation. For this reason, by considering "Weems' topographics of disorientation" (Gander, 2020), we pursue to

interpret tropes as the rhetorical figures (Weems' black bodies) that create disorientation and deviation in writing antiracist feminist narratives.

Regarding intersectionality, we introduced Kimberly Crenshaw's definition of intersectional theory in the classroom to reveal why the interaction between race and gender is necessary to critically analyse the experiences of black women in labour (Crenshaw, 1991), and we adapted it to understand black women's lives and vulnerabilities in art. We also included some excerpts by Brah and Phenix (2004) and Portocarrero (2013) to define intersectional analysis as a research tool that can be useful in interpreting women's narratives, subjectivities, and power structures. After approaching racism, classism, ageism, ableism, homophobia, and sexism as constitutive of the multiple oppressions suffered by marginalised groups - reproducing inequalities in education indeed - we listened together with the students to Angela Davis' statement on intersectionality. Here, Davis (2017) confronts intersectionality with mainstream feminism and claims for an "intersectionality of social justice struggles" that will defy racialised stratification and focuses on the vindications of women who are at the bottom, not of those who in their privileges grasp the ceiling glass: "Revolutionary hope resides precisely among those women who have been abandoned by history and who are now standing up and making their demands heard" (Davis, 2017, 50').

Considering the classroom from the perspective of intersectionality, the youth coming to the educational degrees are from working and low-middle class families living in peripheral towns near the campus, not in the metropolis. Most of them are third or fourth-generation immigrants, whose vulnerable predecessors arrived from southern and north-western regions of Spain, looking for better opportunities after the civil war. They are not considered immigrants anymore, neither are their parents. There are no African or Asian Muslim or Latino-American students in this edition of the course, who are a

minority in the faculty. There is a Portuguese Erasmus student, a racialised woman, and a few students come from the Roma community. From the perspective of gender and LGBTQ+, only four students are men, and there is a significant number of non-binary and non-heteronormative students. In this regard, the tension between the normative and the counter-hegemonic permeates the curriculum, and the students feel sensitive to functional diversity and mental health. Despite that the stories of African Americans seem distant, they make a lot of sense in the South of Europe, where some students have also experienced discrimination and exclusion.

In the next section we analyse the knowledge that emerges from the reciprocity between the visual tropes and intersectionality from a narrative inquiry perspective. As teachers-researchers, we conceive narrative in multiple directions: the way the student learns to teach, the medium of the tropes, and the visual strategy for the artist and the researcher. Ultimately, narrative is also the reflexive strategy used by Carrie Mae Weems to feel involved in a critical, creative process in the photographic series, films, and performances. Working on Carrie Mae Weems' stories with the students, we dealt with the intersectional tropes in her work to develop a feminist decolonial pedagogical practice. According to Walsh (2013, quoting Fanon), decolonisation means unlearning and being aware of racialised bodies: the body of the artist, the body of the artwork, and the body of the student as a spectator. Although the intersectional tropes in Carry Mae Weems' bodies seem evident in the way she collapses and resists the anti-blackness discourse through visual engagement, its repercussion for the pedagogical practice is not. Paying attention to participants' narrative agency is "a voice giving-process" in research (Abkhezr, McMahon, Campbell and Glasheen, 2020), not in an essentialist sense, but to explore disorientations and unlearning in narrative productions during the process through which the students become teachers.

3. The connecting tropes of intersectionality: from critical arts to decolonial feminist pedagogies

Within this section, we will interpret and discuss the disorientations and unlearning that affected the students, their dialogues with the topic and the development of strategies to transform pedagogy through critical arts. The students worked in five teams (G1-G5), and the school trip (S3), which started in the KBr and finished in the MACBA Chapel, became a turning point in this art pedagogical project. At the end of the visit, Elvira Dyangani Ose received us for a conversation, in front of a cartography based on the chronology-glossary included in the catalogue (Muñoz de la Vega, 2022). The meeting with Elvira was crucial because she sees herself as a black feminist intellectual and as an "affective curator"; consequently, she narrated some stories and shared an embodied interpretation of Weems' pieces with the students. The group felt touched by the tales and connections when she reconstructed the multiple contexts of the artworks, from the creative and research process to the exhibition and the cultural spaces. What we analysed next was created by the students after the visit when they assumed the role of interpreters and pedagogues.

3.1. The trope of the mirror. The fractures and interstices of inclusion

Back to the university spaces, the first group begins to deepen the analysis and elucidates the connection between the series: *Ain't Jokin'* (1987-1988) and *American Idols* (1988-1989) (Figure 1: top). They have delved into the exhibition's texts to approach the pieces, allowing them to identify the importance of wit and irony reappropriated, the fabrication of the trope that dismantles racist prejudices and stereotypes. They highlight the interstitial space between the texts and the images, both in the documentary images and the performed scenes, which are interrupted by an unexpected visual twist or the foot of the image, using defamiliarization and resignification as critical tools. In one of the *Ain't*

Jokin' series pieces, Weems transforms the riddle into an insult: "Looking into the mirror, the black women asked: 'Mirror, mirror on the wall, who is the finest of them all?' And the mirror says, 'Snow white you black bitch, and don't you forget it!!!" Significantly, by reflecting on the role of language and communication, the students contextualise this piece as follows:

...jokes throughout history have always been used as an instrument to speak disparagingly towards black persons, even to deny them and to subject them to the control of the white figure. (...) she [the artist] uses short and very concise language that gives rise to what could seem like an advertising campaign, like nothing conventional, about racist humour. Language becomes a very important figure, it is the medium of interpellation of the subject, it is direct, and, in many cases, it uses the question to engage the reader of these artworks to revise the prejudices we have about a black person. (G1, S4) (3)

The confrontation between purity and perversion in this "allegory of Snow White" [*Mirror, mirror*] can be analysed from the intersection of racial and gender oppressions. As the students argue: "the artist addresses prejudice based on skin colour, using a racist joke to disarm racism. And through this joke, we see how the black person always needs the approval of the white person to be accepted" (G1, S4). Moreover, Shane situates intersectionality in the trope of the mirror to make visible a "critique of shaming of the black female body in American visual cultures" (2018, 501), which not only serves to the deconstruction of shame but to an affirming process for black female subjectivities. The students stress the viewers' disappointment when a black woman embodies Snow White, and another displacement occurs when this black woman sees a white (colonial) fairy tale in the mirror. There is no correspondence in the reflection (hooks, 1995b) and the

(dis)orientation of black women proves the rejection of the white inquisition. The mirror of modernist women artists that recognises the feminine self, reflexivity, and intimacy is metaphorically shattered, exposing the multiple negations that black women suffer: by culture, art, and history; by the Western and male gaze; and by the white feminist gaze.

The trope of the reprehensible, unpretentious black woman is associated with black women in art history. Another group recited Carry Mae Weems saying that “there are two possibilities: either she has not been represented, or she has been portrayed as a sexual figure or even a savage” (G3, S4). However, they remarked that the artist herself performs a third option, one that resists and multiplies this definition of black femininity. In her other series, *Not Manet's Type* (2010), Weems criticises modernist art, which has always painted white-skinned women in private settings dominated by white men as the masters of the public sphere (Pollock, 1988). The artist responds to this power dynamics by portraying herself in a domestic space, such as her room, and she uses again the text in each footer to criticise this white and colonial gaze, by conquering the right to her image after being subjected to the patriarchal and colonising gaze for years. The gaze no longer sexualises and discriminates, does not control, and does not point, but there is a look that claims a form of introspection, reflection, and conscious production.



Figure 1.

Similarly, these two student groups have explored the productive dissonance between text and image (Frederic and Patel, 2018) to design classroom activities. Facing "the pathological mirror of racism and sexism" (Shane, 2018, 509), the second group reflects on a deeper look and acknowledges that the framing, the angle, and some details have changed. Perhaps what caught their attention were some elisions and singularities that, until now, they were not used to seeing in a museum because they had been ignored. Consequently, using performative strategies, this group designed "a feminist dresser," a mock-up reproducing a gallery with three dressing tables on both sides of the room. We can sit on the rotating stools and see different plasticised images glued to different mirrors. On one side, we see paintings of white cis men who have painted women in private spaces; on the other hand, we observe different representations, where we do not

only look at the woman's body but see her (Figure 1: low). The representation of women is subverted in the artistic creation; there is a play of looks, we see ourselves reflected in the mirror, and we come across a phrase that says: "Who do you let look at you?".

The gaze here diversifies, becomes more complex and challenges us through this question, and as Hustvedt (2016) would say, we feel now like *A Woman Looking at Men Looking at Women*. Eventually, as a participatory pedagogic device, the students place markers inviting us to answer the question. They have integrated what Shane has noted: "whether with a vanity mirror, a magic mirror, or a hand-held mirror, Weems shows that to counter shame, the mirror is a critical apparatus for the construction of black female subjectivity and beauty" (2018, 518). Both artistically and pedagogically, this space became crucial to generating a moment of intimacy and introspection, it materialises the reflection, critical thinking, introspection, and intimacy in the classroom. Maybe a feminist art education has to do with transgressing the value of the intimate, usually subordinate to something banal. With this, the visibility of the personal life exposes us, but at the same time, it is political: the power and value of intimacy have to do with what is silent and what is hidden beneath what is socially accepted or normal (Zafra, 2011). Eventually, this is essential for creating emancipatory imaginaries in the face of homogenising cultures (Author, 2022) and for the subjective construction of children in multicultural and diverse contexts.

3.2. Trope diffraction to revalue children's and youth agencies

"I thought I was going crazy when she turned blue-black right before my eyes"

Tony Morrison, *Sweetness*, 2015.

Tropes are social and symbolic constructions that often involve pejorative representations of those to whom they are addressed, inscribing and condensing their subjectivities in the

structural dynamics of power through language, for example: the trope of childhood as innocent, the trope of black youth as murderers, the trope of black womanhood as unvirtuous and reprehensible, the trope of the victim standard of black girls and other marginalised youth, the tropes of sensationalised depictions of violence, the use of victim rhetoric, the trope of the strong black woman. All those constructions limit narratives and reinforce excessive surveillance and the creation of conflicting racialised profiles. However, these tropes that encapsulate meanings can be diffracted, multiplied, and interrupted, offering other representations from black feminism, black history, and critical race theory by means of visual culture and critical arts.

Children's and young people's subjectivities and memory were the topic assigned to another group (G2), based on the pair: *Colored People* (1989/2019) and *All the Boys* (2016). Given the subject of this pre-service training course, the first piece seemed a prominent choice; on the other hand, the dialogue of this work was possible with many different pieces of the exhibition, which would have given rise to other themes, such as the reconstruction of the family album. However, the connection with *All the Boys*, perhaps less explicit, made it possible to discuss the following topics: the boundaries between childhood and adolescence; children and young people as political subjects; subjectivity and agency from an intersectional perspective; children's and youth's lives affected by racism, forms of social control and state repression; and the belonging and participation of children and young people into the community. This group emphasises that in Weems' art "children are the hope of the future; she maintains that when we are aware of racial stereotypes, this fact prevents the subject from developing their agentic capacity freely without taking into account these stereotypes that are assigned to us" (G2 S4).

The students did not so much allude to the kaleidoscopic composition of *Colored People*, which in its 2019 version differs from the initial triptychs of 1989, as to the juxtaposition of filters in the images of children and young people (yellow, blue, purple, magenta...). They say the "colored" symbolises the different skin tones and the hierarchies existing within the Afro-descendant community, aligned with the biography of the protagonist in Tony Morrison's account. The diversity of points of view (the faces showed frontal, foreshortened, profile) evinces that it is impossible to summarise children's subjectivities in a unique photograph and that images are always constructed. They maintain that the artist makes a parody with the title of the works that make up *Colored People*, such as in *Blue Black Boy*, as the dialogue between the students reflects (Figure 2). Furthermore, they highlighted the patterns creating repetition and the synaesthesia derived from the perceptual experience.

The orientations and disorientations of the trope emerge when watching the artworks. As one student recognised – referring specifically to the piece *All the boys* (2016) –, they let the artworks affect them in the exhibition: "Well, I think it is very impressive when you see a police record and you imagine a piece of normal paper, in small. And then you arrive there and it's huge, the artwork is huge" (S6). After the visit, this student also pointed out that it was possible to see the *punctum* as something that changes from person to person because it touches our emotions [quoting Barthes]. Furthermore, Ward (2018) considers *All the Boys* (2016) a counter-narrative of refusal, a response to the history of violence against black youth, which is often exhibited as spectacular and new. Dyangani Ose - the curator - explained that Weems had already been a forerunner of the Black Lives Matter movement, and the students situate the work one year after the Charleston massacre. *All the Boys* is a memorial and takes the form of a "collective mourning" (Ward, 2018), and it was surrounded by *Constructing History: A*

Requiem to Mark the Moment (2008) and *The Push, The Call, The Scream and The Dream* (2020) as epithets of violence.

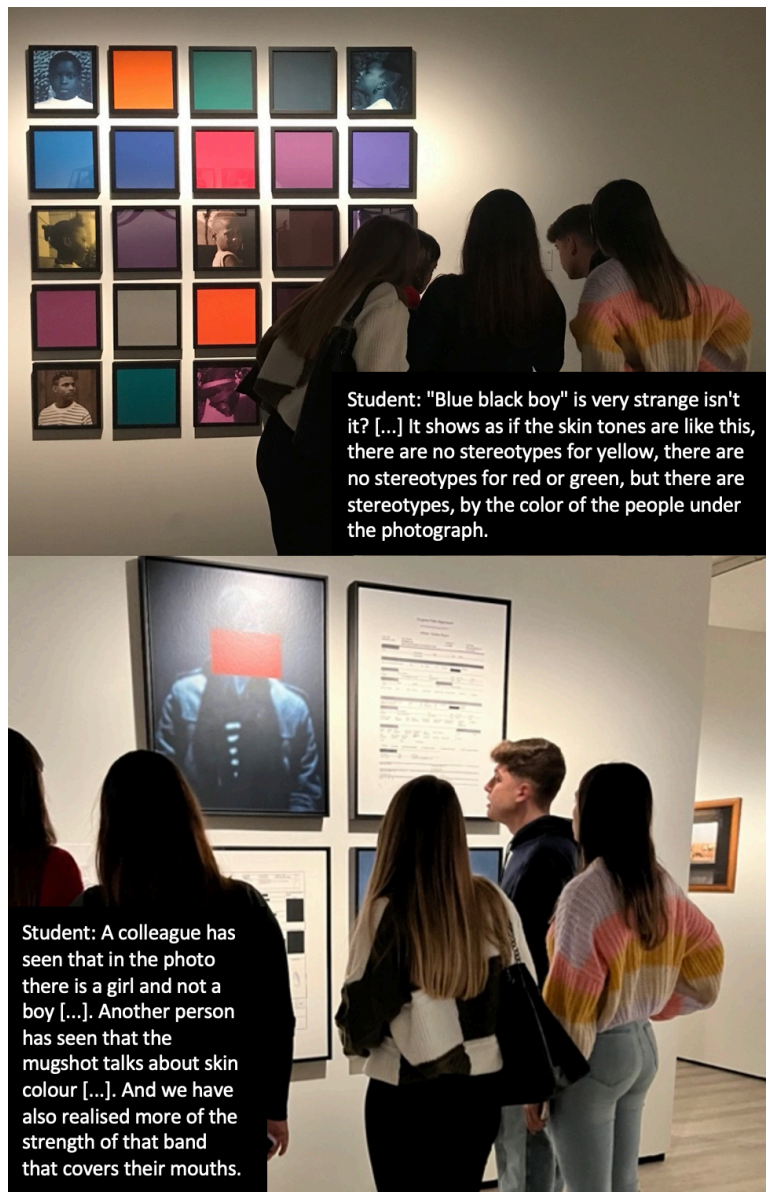


Figure 2

The emotional embodied spectatorship, as well as the link between the theory and attentive observation, triggered the students' analysis of the trope from an intersectional perspective (see Figure 2). If Weems challenges gender, race and ethnicity with *All the Boys* (read the student's voice in Figure 2), in *Colored People* she questions age limits. In her return to the group, the teacher underlines more about finding a police record as an

aesthetic and political object in the gallery, with the blurred images of youth, and as she said: "What is seen is as significant as what is not seen" (S4). In other words, the intervention of the artist on the image and the text to be exhibited also discloses the discourse of refusal, which is built both through what is seen and what is hidden and emphasises the tension between intimacy and protection of young people who are exposed to die. In the museum, like in real life, objects, bodies, and spaces shape black youth subjectivity:

"What does it mean to wear a hoodie?" and "What does it mean to be black and wear a hoodie?" Weems is also conceptually and visually asking another question, one posed by Mimi Nguyen in her essay on Trayvon Martin and the hoodie, "What cover, then, does the hoodie provide?" Of course, the larger issue for Weems is not about the hoodie-as-object, which does have some theoretical purchase, but about the ways the "hoodie" –as an object of blackness and masculinity– carries with it a constructed history that legitimates particular violence against certain racially marked bodies. This series throws into constant relief this history of racialised violence and its material manifestation in our contemporary moment. (Ward, 2018, 89)

Tropes are diffracted and relocated in the narrative to revalue agency, alliances, and empowerment. They resist definitions, their meaning deviates and multiplies, do not represent what they mean, and require an exercise of the imagination. The museum and the pedagogical devices, the material practices, the spaces, and times that transgress the conventional curriculum, function as places of resistance against the predominantly Eurocentric school curriculum. Those elements allow us to decolonise, unlearn and be aware of racialised bodies (Walsh, 2013) and challenge the colonial curricular continuities by focusing on the stories of blackness and the artist's role as a narrator of Afro-descendant stories. Narrative works as a reflexive method, as "coming to voice"

(hooks, 1989), as a strategy for decolonising pedagogy through contemporary art; and counter-narratives function as a "pedagogy of hope" (Mogadime, 2000, 229).

3.3. The trope of slavery. Distant others and suffering as critical lenses

In the classroom, as we did during the visit, we moved towards the trope of slavery, contemplating the work *From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried* (1995-96), a photo essay that reframes a story of oppression into a narrative of resistance. In this work, Weems transforms the original purpose of a series of photographs of enslaved people from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and reconsiders daguerreotypes as objects that can empower the subjects they had photographed rather than denigrate them. One of the elements of Weems' art that makes her a visual activist (Moranski, 2020) is the performative nature of her work. In *From Here I Saw*, empowerment is generated through recontextualization, reframing and the reappropriation of dehumanising and racist images: on the one hand, she presents the past from a critical perspective, like an oppositional gaze (hooks, 1992), accompanying images with textual narrative; on the other hand, she questions the modernist nature of the systems of representation, through appropriating and questioning the veracity of the archives (Nora, 1989).

Inside the set of photos framed identically with an intense red circle, there is a text that is also part of the continuous narrative where the words are not simply informative but an interpellation. Weems reproduced, coloured, reframed, and with that inscription, these pieces challenge us, address us beginning with "you" as a way to both speaking from the image [to the viewers] and to the subjects themselves that appear on the pictures: "you become a scientific profile", "a negroid type", "an anthropological debate", "and a photographic subject" (Getty Museum, 2011). At each end of the series, we see the profile of the female figure "Nobosodrou, Femme Mangbetu" dyed blue, one facing right and the other inverted so that both are looking at each other and witnessing

the racism and violence of the thirty images reprinted in red. This portrait was part of a collection of ethnographic photographs taken by George Specht on an expedition to central Africa and has been presented on other occasions in a colonial gesture of exhibiting the other primitive (Lyndernberg, 2018). The other portraits begin with images of Africans kidnapped and enslaved; then, four daguerreotypes were created initially to support racist science, and in other photos, the bodies exhibited were classified and abused ideologically.

There is a distance between us as an audience and the daguerreotypes we observe. This fact makes the students want to focus on how the author uses the gaze, who looks and how we look, to convey social criticism. Following Raymond (2014), we should ask: How does Weems challenge us with this cruel revelation of sadism? The sensations are contradictory: between discomfort and indignation (see Figure 3). We are in a public space, the museum, a place of cultural privilege, and we feel protected by this physical space. However, we observe these heart-breaking portraits, which hurt us because they show suffering and cruelty. Now, they are the ones who are looking at us, returning the look that the politics of slavery had denied them. Moreover, the passive gaze with which they were photographed becomes an active resistance that challenges the structures of domination that have built blackness for many years. As hooks says, "by courageously looking, we defiantly declared: not only will I stare, I want my look to change reality" (1992, 116).



Figure 3

Weems bridges the distance between the public and the photographed subjects (Raymond, 2014), approaching the suffering of the distant other, making us feel the violence and harshness of the images. Fear, stench and discomfort appeared during classroom dialogues as we approached specific issues as white people: they affect society and ourselves because we feel that they point us out, point out our white bodies, and blame us. However, these dialogues between the artist's work and the evocations and affections of students involve a way to decolonise the curriculum because they lead to awareness of racialised bodies and decentre the Western world.

After research and analysis, the student teachers (G4) transform their reflections into an artistic and educational resource. Through a critique of the colonial gaze of photojournalism, the students explain they have imitated the visual format of Weems' work but focusing on childhood. In their presentation, they invite us to reconsider where

we are looking from, demonstrating their intention of denouncing photo and social criticism through six photographs which depict the reality of different childhoods, taken from various editions of the annual *World Press Photo competition* (see also Figure 3). Two posters with text frame the six images with two quotes that present and close the exhibition proposal. The first quotation from bell hooks (1992) situates us in what we will see: "The 'gaze' has always been political in my life. Imagine the terror felt by the child who has come to understand through repeated punishments that one's gaze can be dangerous" (p. 115). The second quotation by Pere Ortin (n.d) concludes the work by saying, "we must escape the narrative prison of the colonial mentality, lose the privilege of discourses and change the colonial grammar that dominates the production of almost all Western media narratives."

In their portfolio, the students narrated their research and analysis process. By thinking about implementing an activity for the school context, they have asked themselves: How do we look at the so-called "third world"? How does the sensationalism of the photo-report guide the gaze? After querying Weems' arts critically, they were prepared to answer how they would approach it in the classroom:

We would start the session with the children watching the exhibition just as you did. In this part, we wanted to criticise photojournalism somehow, and in the second part, the child would start doing things. We would ask them to bring a photograph of their childhood that we would edit just as we did with these photos, and they would have to add a sentence that an adult has told them at some point in their life. Then, we would transport this message to the closest and the most everyday reality of the child and set up our exhibition with the realities each child in the classroom has experienced. It would be like the way to close the final production of our proposal. (G4, S6)

We see that in the same way that Weems questions nineteenth-century photography as a classification system and rejects the documentary genre since it supports ideological notions about race, social class and gender, the students use their educational proposal to play with the genre of photojournalism, to intervene in it, manipulating it. This time, they focus on the different realities of childhood by addressing issues such as war, migration, authoritarian states, and child exploitation. With her work, Weems gives back the humanity the original photographs had stolen. The students want to transport the work's message to the children's closest realities to conclude the final production of their proposal. To escape the cruel romanticisation of photojournalism, the educational proposal draws children closer to the content of the work by addressing and inviting them to bring a photograph of their childhood and edit and add a sentence that an adult had told them in the past. This fourth group employed this strategy to develop an art education practice from a non-adult-centric perspective.

3.4. The trope (and the curriculum) reimagined: the power of popular culture

During the first group's presentation, the students had emphasised the framing of everyday objects in the dining room or kitchen of the *American Icons*, which have in common that the trope manifests itself "in the form of black people rendering a service" (G1, S4). Tensing to dismantle "the trope of the black attendant" of the Eurocentric art history (Pollock, 1999; Van Haute, 2016; O'Grady, 2003), the students affirmed that these images are not harmless fictions, but show black people in a subordinated position assisting white people and perpetuate job stratification through establishing an equivalence between services and slavery: "it speaks a little about the structural racism that is permeated in our daily lives, as this is given for fact and many times it is trivialised" (G1, S4). Objectification and domestication merge in these analogies of black people as commodities, like the figure carrying a container of letters, the two tiny ceramics for salt

and pepper shakers or the toy in the children's room. The recurring character of "Sambo" –they contextualised this character from the "children's book *Little Black Sambo*" (G1, S4)– dismantles the stereotype and prejudice by focusing on the absurdity of this racist popular icon, struggling against denigration, exaggeration, and disrespect through this tiny character.

Oppositely, in other series, never seeing her muse's face tells us about the silencing of the black woman's identity, something that happens when we look at the series of *Roaming* (2006) and *Slow Fade to Black* (2009-2011). Focusing on the analysis of *Slow Fade to Black*, the last group of students (G5) confronts the fading of African American women artists who have been prominent in some point of history. Students are aware that in blurring their racialised bodies, Weems is complaining about the invisible stories in the musical heritage and the asymmetries of cultural power. Travis (2022) describes this confrontation as flashpoints, as moments of embodied friction, such as critical frictions –openings and ruptures that call our attention to underlying phenomena within our experience. In this case, the students felt disoriented, even to the point of anger, because, at first, they did not understand why Weems blurred a woman who was also Afro-descendant.

With *Slow Fade to Black*, she wants to bring to our attention the fact that many black artists –mainly jazz singers– have faded from our historical consciousness. For this reason, she extracts advertising photographs that depict artists such as Eartha Kitt, Billie Holiday and Betty Carter and blurs them. The artist uses black and white to interrogate the past as a metaphor for discussing race issues. Moreover, we observe how a shade tinged with dark predominates in the figures, suggesting the lack of recognition based on skin tone. We also see Mahalia Jackson's face (a gospel singer) in another gallery space near the diptychs of *All the Boys*. Even if the photograph is blurred, we observe that she

is voicing her pain, as if the power of music gives voice to pain and struggle or as if it were a path that can take us away from defeatism. Music for Weems is a strategic resource of resistance and a source of strength and hope (Lydenberg, 2018). Besides, the pleasure of music is not only a beautification of truth but a strategy to bring complex thoughts and feelings nearby to the audience. This series clearly shows the vindication of the role of music and popular culture concerning the gendered racialisation of bodies. Furthermore, as the students recognise, the blur serves to denounce the ostracism to which Afro-descendant singers have been condemned by society and the media.

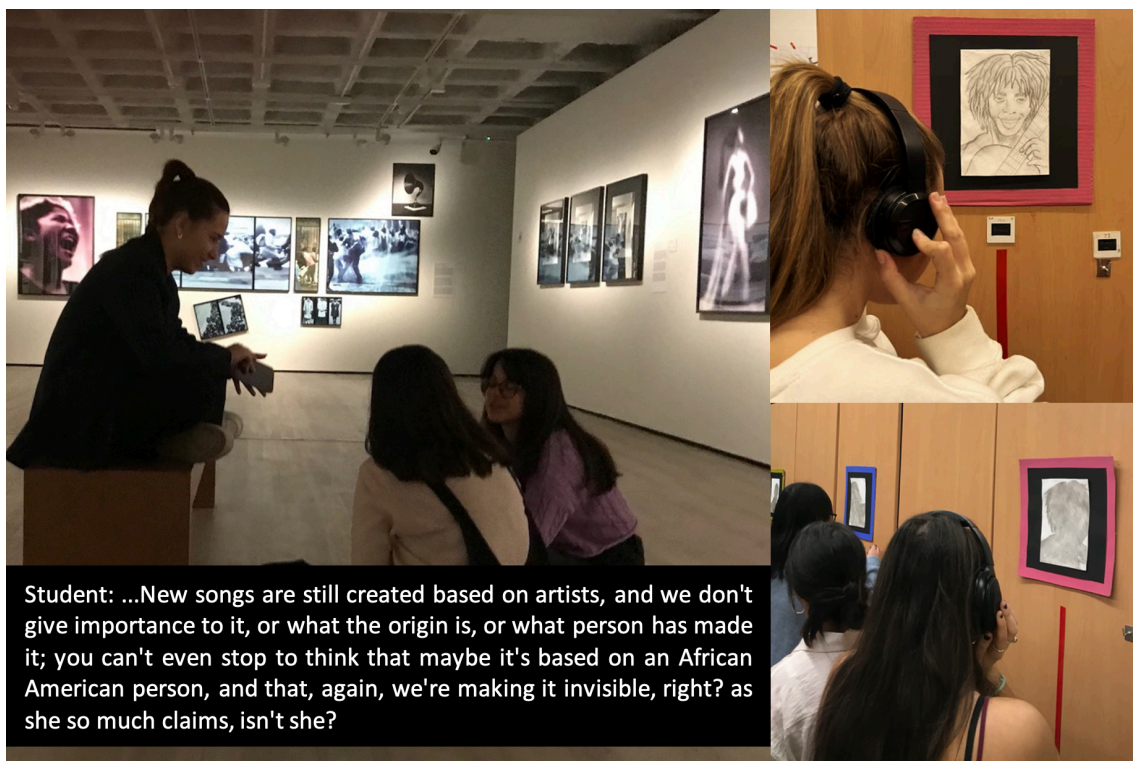


Figure 4

As a result of this invisibility and loss of value of Afro-descendant women in the art world, the students' analysis evokes a reality that exists in today's music, and they focused on reggaeton as coming from popular culture as a genre that is also blurred, in the sense that we do not know the roots of certain current songs we listen to repeatedly. To make the educational proposal, the fifth group designed a sound installation inviting us to have

a multisensory inclusive experience (see Figure 4). Colours, images, and vibrant sounds guide us as we walk along a tunnel, emulating a music studio or a red carpet. On one side of the hallway, there are three paintings with profiles of Afro-descendant artists, and on the other side, there are other pictures with current famous artists but with blurred silhouettes. The provision of value is invested here: the blurred silhouettes belong to present reggaeton singers, such as Anuel, with the song *China* (2019); while on the other side, we see the drawn figure of the original singer, Shaggy, an African American artist less recognised by the students with the song from *It Wasn't Me* (2000). To sum up, the reinterpretation highlights a cultural hierarchy that recognises some singers more than others. This fact generates fascination and anxiety in the classroom and, at the same time, fuelled the debate about who decides that certain artists have considerable progress and why others disappear in time. It was also remarkable that, by listening to the melodies you could find the connection between reggaeton and reggae. In this way, the students concluded:

Well, it was also a provision of value, wasn't it? Because in the end, there are three songs from there, the current ones, that are heard and that's it, that is, we don't want to demolish anything either. We know that these songs have their reference [indicating the present ones] and that these people, these artists from there, from 20 years ago, seem to have disappeared from the music scene. Instead, they are references to artists right now with super heavy similarities. So good, it's that, a value, a presentation of "this is great", and we don't take value away from anything, but look, 20 years ago it was like that (G5, S6).

How the students have translated the analysis of *Slow Fade to Black* work into a new artistic and educational resource makes us know and value the musical art of other cultures and segments of society, not as a way of rejecting any musical genre but to

expand the socio-cultural imaginary, reinforcing the legacies of the cultural hierarchy and vindicating the shortcomings of history. The axes of exclusion can also be blurred by making social imaginaries richer, giving space to musical diversity normally left out of the field. Moreover, through this educational proposal, we have discovered roots we were unaware of and established a link between music and the ostracism generated towards certain social groups. With this interactive installation, through playing reggae music whose origins are in Jamaica, the students can reimagine identity, knowledge, and space to include black popular culture in the curriculum from a social justice-oriented art education.

4. Coda: unlearning, disorientations, and cracks

At the end of the visit, when some students saw the video-installation *Lincoln, Lonnie, and Me – A story in 5 parts* (2012) in the MACBA chapel, they felt more disoriented than watching the photographs. In this video installation we are confronted with the spectral bodies facing the history of racism, something that reveals the complexity of interpreting Weems' art, and how this is related to the "uncertain pedagogies" that forced the students to move outside their zone of comfort (Atkinson, 2011) and problematise unlearning (Walsh, 2013). What has emerged when searching for synergies between the spaces of the exhibition and the university classroom is that we had to inquire the intersectional tropes by Carrie Mae Weems to discover that dialogism is not only necessary to learn the strategies that allow us to interpret the artworks but to feel immersed in the creative and experimental process of narrative unlearning.

To sum up, through this critical arts project based on Carrie Mae Weems' tropes with future teachers, the following findings emerge for critical art pedagogies:

- a. The student teachers are aware of the mechanisms of language and communication that have historically produced racism and sexism. For instance,

they fracture the colonial mirror and explore the interstices between image and text to provoke other meanings while exposing the interrelated oppressions of racism and sexism.

- b. By criticising adult centrism, control and subjugation, the students reflect and concentrate on children's and youth agencies and how educational disorientations in museums and schools can be spaces for reappropriation.
- c. The recognition of how racism and violence operate visually and intersectionally, and how they go through institutions, everyday life, and bodies, defies the dehumanisation perpetrated by the gendered colonial gaze.
- d. Positioned in the feminist affective pedagogies, the critical analysis and research laid the groundwork for a collaborative decolonial process of thinking and experimenting with critical arts for pedagogical purposes. The student teachers felt touched by the visual narratives displayed at the exhibition.
- e. By working in critical visualities, they subvert schools and museums as places of cultural privilege and the asymmetries of cultural power, at the same time they are involved in designing resources and spaces for art education.
- f. Moreover, the awareness of the social, political, and cultural construction of values and norms pushed the students far from the taken-for-granted dynamics. It encouraged the future teachers to make those regulations visible and experiment with other imaginaries.
- g. The display of popular culture to create more equitable, participatory, and multisensory resources by future educators evidences the link between critical arts and transformative education.

Finally, the understanding of the visual intersectional tropes has opened spaces to reimagine art pedagogies from inclusive, feminist, and anti-racist narratives. As we asked the students during this process: Can we dialogue with the cracks –using Catherine Walsh’s words (2021)– that Carrie Mae Weems has opened with her art? And, even more: Can we teach early childhood and primary education students to navigate through these cracks? The contribution of decolonial feminism to art education practices was resolved by one of the students like this: these "small ones often unnoticed cracks weaken the hegemonic structure and deny the borders imposed to see possibilities beyond (hope). But this is only possible if someone, like the teachers, acts to crack and make visible everything invisible" (G2, individual assignment). When Carrie Mae Weems talked about her influences, she also quoted –coinciding with Walsh– the art intervention *Shibboleth* by Doris Salcedo (2007) and concluded: the cracks "have to be looked at, to be negotiated, to be understood. Right? (...) there's no place else for us to go than to figure out inventive and ingenious ways to deal with" (Weems, 2015, 21').

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Footnotes

1. <https://kbr.fundacionmapfre.org/media/2022/10/aaff-cmw-pdf-web-qr-en.pdf>

2. https://guies.uab.cat/guies_docents/public/portal/html/2023/assignatura/106073/en

3. These quotes have been translated by the authors and preserve the students' voices.