

NANCY KEEFE RHODES

## Race, Activism and Photography

2020 Social Justice Symposium

Race, Activism and Photography: 2020 Social Justice Symposium: Center for Photography at Woodstock, Woodstock, New York: December 3–5, 2020.

“Nobody really knows what to do about racism, just like nobody really knows what to say to someone who won’t wear a mask.”

—Carrie Mae Weems, during the Q&A after her presentation of the inaugural Arnold Newman Lecture at the Center for Photography at Woodstock’s “Race, Activism and Photography: 2020 Social Justice Symposium”

After George Floyd suffocated at the hands of Minneapolis, Minnesota, police on Memorial Day in 2020, the tidal wave of global protests overran the streets, sluicing through the art world too. Early summer saw many galleries and museums in the United States scramble to post public statements against racist violence, often acknowledging they needed to do better themselves in serving and representing audiences and artists alike. Some, like the Everson Museum in Syracuse, New York, where I live, controversially sold signature works to diversify their permanent collections. The photographer Carrie Mae Weems says she takes no pride in being the first Black artist to have a solo exhibition at the Guggenheim—that was in 2014—and observes that most American galleries and museums were “woefully unprepared for this reckoning.”<sup>1</sup>

But two hours north of Manhattan, the Center for Photography at Woodstock (CPW) has been about this work for a long time. CPW began Woodstock AIR, a residency program dedicated to photographic artists and writers of color, under its executive director Ariel Shanberg in 1999. Artinfo has called it one of the twenty best artist residencies in the country. In 2015, Hannah Frieser succeeded Shanberg as CPW’s executive director after leaving the same position at Light Work in Syracuse. Right before New Year’s, Frieser told me that, only weeks after Floyd’s death, she invited Miriam Romais, formerly of the Bronx nonprofit En Foco, to “put something together—maybe

1. Carrie Mae Weems, interview by author via phone, December 30, 2020.

an afternoon roundtable.”<sup>2</sup> Practiced partners, they had spent three years organizing the 2010 annual conference for the Society for Photographic Education (SPE) under the theme of “Facing Diversity: Leveling the Playing Field in the Photographic Arts.”<sup>3</sup>

“Race, Activism and Photography: 2020 Social Justice Symposium” and the funding to support it came together in five months of Monday night meetings among Frieser, Romais, independent gallerist and writer Charles Guice, CWP events and development coordinator Dani Catton, New York City-based writer and photographer Qiana Mes-trich, and others. For as little as twenty dollars, 348 people registered from across the US, Europe, Asia, and Latin America for two evenings and an afternoon of panels, screenings, artist presentations, a preview of Elizabeth Ferrer’s landmark book *Latinx Photography in the United States: A Visual History* (published in January 2021 by University of Washington Press), a virtual tour of CPW’s gallery, and Weems’s keynote, which launched the endowed Arnold Newman Lectures at Woodstock.

The presenters—Sophia Nahli Allison, Sama Alshaibi, Emilie Boone, Dannielle Bowman, Mercedes Dorame, Elizabeth Ferrer, Kris Graves, Daesha Devón Harris, L. Kasimu Harris, Chris Johnson, Tarrah Krajnak, Dionne Lee, Annu Palakunnathu Matthew, Lorena Molina, Courtney Reid-Eaton, Gabriel Garcia Román, Aaron Turner, Claire A. Warden, and Suné Woods—came not entirely but mostly from the roster of previous Woodstock AIRs. This is perhaps as important as the content of the sessions themselves. A longer, more typical conference report would focus in some detail on the precise, rigorous, rich content of each session’s conversation and the striking accomplishments of each presenter. Many of this symposium’s participants now teach, write, and mentor others, started and head programs, host podcasts, and appear on major platforms. Of several themes that emerged from this event, among the most striking is a particular notion of what comprises artistic “success” and how to get there, which is not stranding yourself out on an ice floe alone.

For almost two-thirds of the 138 Woodstock AIRS to date, CPW was their first residency. When we spoke, Frieser told me, “Marginalized artists trying to make it in the mainstream are often working in isolation, the first in their family in college, their faculty was all white, perhaps their family discouraged them because they couldn’t make it. They need resources, but nurture too.” Except for informal reunions at SPE conferences and a champagne reception at the 2019 meeting of the Association of International Photography Art Dealers (AIPAD), the body of Woodstock AIRs had never come together in this way before. “Zoom made that possible,” says Frieser. After a month-long search of AIR portfolios back to 1999, Guice structured the program and extended invitations. Co-founder with Frieser of *Converging Perspectives*,<sup>4</sup> a new online international photo site, Guice agrees that his ordering and pairing of participants closely resembled matchmaking. “Yes, that’s what I was thinking!” he laughs. This is, you will

2. All quotations from Hannah Frieser and Charles Guice are from a joint phone interview by the author, December 30, 2020.

3. For more information on this conference see [www.spenational.org/files/conferences/2010specpgfinaloptimized.pdf](http://www.spenational.org/files/conferences/2010specpgfinaloptimized.pdf).

4. See [www.convergingperspectives.org](http://www.convergingperspectives.org).



IMAGE 1. *1839–Present: Self Documentation* (2018) from the series *Dreaming Gave Us Wings* (2017–present) by Sophia Nahli Allison; © Sophia Nahli Allison.

notice, almost exactly the opposite in spirit and approach from the conventional blind peer review process in which you recuse yourself if you discover you know the applicant.

For example, Day Two’s focus on identity and representation ended with a conversation between Dannielle Bowman and Sophia Nahli Allison that Chris Johnson of California College of the Arts moderated. Both artists are Los Angeles natives and 2018 AIRs “and Chris has been in California forever,” says Guice, but he also knew none had ever met. Yet their keenly observed appreciation of each other’s place-based work, encouragement for each other’s intention and process, and delight in their own encounter was, as Frieser noted afterward, “exactly why we did this.” Bowman has documented historical sites for the *New York Times*’s “1619 Project” (2019) as well as what she calls “our museums,” the private homes of Los Angeles families who were part of the Great Migration of six million Black families who left the South in the 1960s and ’70s. Allison made two images during her Woodstock AIR for *Dreaming Gave Us Wings*, an ongoing project begun in 2017, based on the legend of Ibo Landing, in which captives transported by ship to American shores escaped slavery by flying back to Africa. Allison also discussed her experimental short documentary, *Love Song for Latasha* (2019).<sup>5</sup> Bowman and Allison followed Ferrer’s presentation of her monumental new history of Latinx photography, deepening our sense of what was lost because so often those early photographers, isolated on opposite coasts, never met.

5. Sophia Nahli Allison’s *Love Song for Latasha* is currently available on Netflix.



IMAGE 2. *Tending Our Mothers' Gardens* (Lydia Bernard-Jones) (2019) by Daesha Devón Harris; © Daesha Devón Harris.

Guice and Frieser also gave precise assignments. They had asked Emilie Boone to start Day One's first session with two images of Harlem: James Van Der Zee's *Black Cross Nurses at UNIA Parade* (1924), made during the Harlem Renaissance, and *Parade* (1937), Aaron Siskind's Depression-era image made for the Photo League's social reform project, the *Harlem Documents*. In these and other images, Boone points out how the subjects' visible responses to the two photographers' presence powerfully contrasts the known and welcomed from the intruder who didn't ask. This interplay of all manner of power, permission, and appropriation permeated the symposium and runs through the work of its artists. Dionne Lee's *A Use for Rope or String* (2016) echoes Frieser's opening symposium remark, "Art is not neutral when the world is not neutral." Immediately following Boone's presentation, this short video again contrasted how a seemingly innocuous tool can equally serve connection or destruction: a delicate, close-up game of cat's cradle between two women against the unspoken but indelible history of lynching. Day One largely focused on portraiture, self and otherwise, with solo presentations, video, and a panel that, in moderator Courtney Reid-Eaton's words, meant to "blow up



IMAGE 3. Carrie Mae Weems; © Audoin Desforges for Rolex, 2020.

portraiture.” But every presenter also acknowledged the importance of previous thinkers and imagemakers. Daesha Davón Harris, a fifth-generation resident of Saratoga Springs, New York, responded to an anonymous portrait from the Tang Archive at Skidmore College in creating her image of a recent college graduate, whom she photographed in the garden of her family home. Harris invoked the legacy of photographer Gordon Parks, W. E. B. DuBois’s notion of “double consciousness,” and Frederick Douglass, also noting that she was presenting her work on the same date that Douglass delivered his “Lecture on Pictures” in 1861.

Day Three addressed art and activism and included a screening of Kris Graves’s documentary *The Testament Project, Volume IV* (2016), a panel of artists from four very disparate locales and communities, and a keynote by Weems that in many ways summed up and validated these presenters’ own vast knowledge of their field and forebears as well as charted how to move forward. Nearly every symposium presenter brings with them into their work

and vision a breadth of predecessors and colleagues—indeed many commonly shared—insisting repeatedly that they are not the first, that this work is not new. (Of Turner, whose portraits teem with multiples, reflections, collaging, and abstraction that he said “look back to DuBois’s double consciousness,” and who has a spring exhibition at Light Work, Mary Lee Hodgens writes memorably that he “arrives en masse.”<sup>6</sup>)

Tarah Krajnak—whose own work intervenes in the canonical images of Ansel Adams and Edward Weston—vividly recalled the first time, as a graduate student in Chicago, she saw Weems’s *From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried* (1995–96), which made use of the nineteenth-century Zealy daguerreotypes of enslaved persons.<sup>7</sup> Those subjects also looked straight back at the photographer. Introducing Weems, Krajnak said, “I will never forget this. I was on my way to an MFA and the first in my family to graduate college and trying to figure out being an artist. I had this encounter with a piece of art that I, for the first time, had the tools to understand.”

For someone who expressed some unease speaking to a black computer screen and told me later she might not do any more virtual keynotes (although she has one scheduled in March), Weems delivered a singularly eloquent and moving talk. She surveyed her own career in rich detail, previewed plans for her own next mass artistic event at the Park Avenue Armory in New York City next December, and sought “always to unpack questions of power,” but began with what she called “influences” and the need to “borrow, appropriate, steal, magnify, reimagine, and reframe” the work of others. She says musicians understand this best, so novices master “the standards” first—she wittily flashed record jackets of “My Way” by Frank Sinatra, Nina Simone, Aretha Franklin, and even Glen Campbell—and although the visual arts may “frown” on this, “there’s no other choice if you’re doing the work seriously.” Weems always starts her talks with other artists because “it’s really how we discover ourselves as artists.”

That, like doing something about racism, is a way of being, not a sometime project.<sup>8</sup> ■

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6. Mary Lee Hodgens, *Contact Sheet #210*, exhibition catalog essay for Aaron Turner’s *Black Alchemy—Backwards/Forwards*, Jan. 25–March 4, 2021, at Light Work, Syracuse, New York (2021).

7. In her talk, Weems mentioned in passing a new book about the Zealy images released in September 2020: *To Make Their Own Way in the World: The Enduring Legacy of the Zealy Daguerreotypes*, ed. Ilisa Barbash, Molly Rogers, and Deborah Willis, published by Aperture and Peabody Museum Press, with a chapter by Weems and new photography made for this project.

8. For more information on participants, a detailed symposium program, and access to symposium session recordings, visit [www.cpw.org/symposium2020](http://www.cpw.org/symposium2020). CPW rebroadcast this event January 29–31, 2021, and envisions a follow-up event.