In the Shadow of the Castle: (Trans)Nationalism, African American Tourism, and Gorée Island

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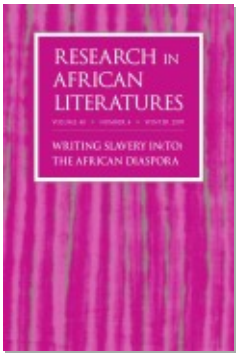

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In the Shadow of the Castle: (Trans)Nationalism, African American Tourism, and Gorée Island

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ABSTRACT

"In The Shadow of the Castle: (Trans) Nationalism, African-American Tourism, and Gorée Island" argues that the late twentieth-century "Back to Africa" discourse departs from the nineteenth-century emigrationist and mid-twentieth-century expatriate "Back to Africa" movements; the contemporary discourse predicates itself more on a commemoration of slavery's past than on creating a programmatic solution for the future and establishing an alternative homeland in an emancipated African postcolonial present. By examining the photographs from Carrie Mae Weems's "Elmina Cape Coast Ile de Goree" and Chester Higgins's "The House of Slaves at the Door of No Return," this article contends that the advent of African American heritage tourism enables post-Civil Rights African Americans to replace (and thus temporarily reconcile) their sense of exclusion from America's canonized national self-narrative with recourse to an alternative, albeit romantically imagined, Diasporic site of origin.

"It is all but impossible to be a Black American and not know Senegal. So many of us made our way to the New World through Gori [sic] Island. Through a fort and a hole in the ground where even yet one hears the moaning of captives. What made those people survive, to replicate themselves—to live?

—Nikki Giovanni, Preface to *Abandoned Baobab* by Ken Bugul

"I had been to the slave castle once before at Goree Island. . . . At one point during my tour I walked into the room designated for the 'crippled and infirmed.' And despite my

> tendency toward ironic detachment in places hollowed by history, to my enormous surprise, I found myself crying uncontrollably."
>
> —Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *Wonders of the African World*

On the warm morning of April 3, 1998, President Bill Clinton's twelve-day tour of sub-Saharan Africa culminated with a visit to the famous slave port at Gorée Island, Senegal. Until then, Clinton's trip to the African continent was an unprecedented gesture by an American president.[1] For many US citizens, Clinton's travels meant an unrivaled return to the paradigmatic African American site of origin; for many in Africa, it suggested American foreign aid to a struggling continent. Only a few days before his Senegal trip, Clinton had visited an elementary school in Mukono, Uganda, where he awkwardly confessed to his audience that "European Americans received the fruits of the slave trade . . . and we were wrong in that" (qtd. in Douglass, "Confronting" A21). Almost immediately, Clinton and his aides bemoaned this admission. Perhaps they feared that his comments would open a national Pandora's Box and thereby release unresolved conflicts about American slavery. Or that Clinton's regret about European-American privilege would exacerbate tensions between blacks and whites about how best to redress the wrongs of slavery. In the aftermath, Clinton aides worked quickly to diffuse rumors that the president had apologized for slavery. His statement transformed from being a request for forgiveness into a simple acknowledgment of Africa's past. The Reverend Jesse Jackson II, then Clinton's special envoy for Africa, publicly dismissed the value of an apology. During his subsequent visit to Robben Island in South Africa, Clinton even told Mandela that a formal apology about slavery would be unfitting because he was more focused on America's future, not its past (Douglass, "Seeing Slavery's Door" A04). At Gorée Island, Clinton would emphasize this point: "We cannot push time backward through the door of no return. We have lived our history, America's struggle to overcome slavery and its legacy forms one of the most difficult chapters of that history" (A04). Through a sleight of hand, Clinton acknowledged America's slave past, while evading its impact on contemporary US race relations. Phrases like "we have *lived* that history" and "one of the most difficult chapter of *that* history" situate slavery and its legacy in a bygone past. In the end, Clinton's "apology" became part of a project to delete chattel slavery from the national memory—to *forget* it, in other words.

While Clinton's trip to Senegal embodies the anxiety associated with formally integrating the memory of slavery into the American national consciousness, this essay examines how many post-Civil Rights African Americans respond to and resist this structural amnesia of slavery in the American landscape by visiting one of the most popular transatlantic symbols of the slave trade, the House of Slaves (in French, La Maison des Esclaves) at Gorée Island, Senegal. More specifically, I contend that while the previous movements of antebellum emigrationists

and Civil Rights-era expatriates framed their "returns" to Africa as a locus of racial and national freedom, the "Back to Africa" discourse, during our post-Civil Rights era, has undergone a significant transformation in which images of global tourism have replaced repatriation rhetoric. I am particularly interested in the way post-Civil Rights African American photographers Chester Higgins and Carrie Mae Weems depict the House of Slaves as a constitutive and generative site of the African Diaspora in order to subvert the racial exclusivity of civic myths in the US. By doing so, their photographs, respectively titled "The House of Slaves at the Door of No Return" and "Elmina Cape Coast Ile de Gorée," assert a narrative of lineage and origins that pre-dates the founding of the United States. On one hand, these images not only reframe the language of civic belonging in the transnational discourse of the African Diaspora, but by doing so simultaneously and inevitably challenge the racial hegemony of the national memory. On the other hand, these visual representations risk reinforcing a touristic gaze of what I understand to be "African American exceptionalism" that posits and arrests "Africa" solely as site of slavery, thereby denying the specificity and contemporaneity of West African nation-states. In these accounts of homecoming and mourning, modern-day Senegal is neither engaged nor integrated. In short, Senegal and by extension Ghana surface as the exclusive mnemonic properties of the African American heritage tourist.

COMING HOME TOURS: CIVIC ESTRANGEMENT AND IMAGINING THE AFRICAN DIASPORA

Even though the first big wave of African American heritage tourism to Africa began in the late 1970s the numbers had, by the mid-1990s, soared to tens of thousands per year (Campbell 372). While many of these tours include more traditional leisure activities like shopping and relaxation, they primarily target African American clientele by describing their travel packages as "coming home" tours. According to anthropologist Edward Brunner, many African American heritage tourists who travel to the slave forts are already motivated by the larger "quest for their roots, to experience one of the very sites from which their ancestors may have begun the torturous journey to the New World" (291). Differing from the emigrationists and expatriates who believed that their travel and eventual relocation to West Africa was *both* a continual affirmation of their cultural identity and an enduring challenge to the hegemony of American slavery or segregation, contemporary African American heritage tourists are more likely to understand their journeys both as a personal reclamation of the slave forts and as a sacred pilgrimage to the home of their enslaved ancestors. While it is difficult to settle on a precise date when the "Back to Africa" discourse transitioned from a movement concerned primarily with repatriation to an effort characterized by commercial tourism, I would argue that we could locate the beginnings of this shift in the mid-1970s, at the intersection of five distinct factors that sparked the first major wave of African American heritage tourists to the slave forts. First, the 1966 political coup in Ghana and the economic instability of independent Tanzania, Guinea, and other African nations of interests for African American expatriates. Second, partly inspired by the success of Alex Haley's neo-slave narrative *Roots* and its attendant miniseries (see Finley, "The Door of No Return"), the increased enthusiasm

for what David Lowenthal describes as "the zeal for genealogy" among African Americans (and all Americans for that matter) to locate their ancestors (xv). Third, the persistent absence of heritage sites in the United States commemorating the histories of enslaved African Americans. Fourth, the designation of the slave forts at Gorée Island in Senegal in 1978 and El Mina and Cape Coast Castles in Ghana in 1979 as "world heritage sites" by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). And fifth, an increase in the standard of living and the newfound emergence of an African American middle class that, due to the political gains of the Civil Rights movement, now had the financial means to engage in large-scale international tourism (Dallen and Teye 114).

Unlike with the slave forts in Ghana, there have been a number of controversies surrounding the House of Slaves concerning its role as a major portal for the transatlantic slave trade.[2] In 1995, the eminent Africanist historian Phillip Curtin said in unequivocable terms that "Goree was never important in the slave trade" and in 1996, French historian Emmanuel de Ru published an article in *Le Monde* titled "Le mythe de la Maison des Esclaves qui résiste à la réalité." This debate, though, played out primarily among French and Senegalese historians and newspapers and had a nominal impact on the African American heritage tourist industry. As such, despite these debates, The House of Slaves remains as one of the most popular and highly visited monuments of the slave trade. Though not all African American tourists consciously or unconsciously visit these slave forts in order to gain a better understanding of their present political status or to put forth new narratives of national belonging, the advent of the contemporary African American heritage tourist is the product of an attempt to reconcile what I describe as a fundamental paradox of racial politics in the post-Civil Rights US: an emergent African American legal citizenship that is complicatedly coupled with a persistent sense of civic estrangement from the rights and privileges of the contemporary public sphere. Because there are so few formal symbols of the lives and contributions of enslaved African Americans in their immediate national landscape, post-Civil Rights African American heritage tourists re-appropriate sites and symbols of their "forgotten" history by returning to West Africa to reclaim these particular slave forts. Through this process of recuperation, these heritage tourists acquire what Cheryl Finley describes as symbolic possession over the historical narratives of American slavery (see "The Door of No Return"). Instead of accepting the conspicuous national *amnesia* of American chattel slavery, these heritage tours allow post-Civil Rights African Americans to render and to remember the transatlantic slave trade as essential to the formation of their African Diasporic identities. On these tours, the slave fort epitomizes the larger African American quest to rediscover a point of cultural origin. By traveling to Gorée Island, El Mina, and Cape Coast, voyagers encounter anew the genealogical discourse of "Mother Africa" and claim alternative founding mythologies of the African Diaspora. By asserting the African Diaspora as a generative site of identity, the African American heritage tourist—to quote Brent Edwards—"likewise inaugurates an ambitious and radically decentered analysis of transnational circuits of culture and politics that are resistant or exorbitant to the frames of nations and circuits" (52). Rather than remaining locked out of national civic myths and denied cultural citizenship, post-Civil Rights African American heritage tourists reclaim slave forts to reconstruct American civic narratives, from a transnational locale. As displaced

figures who invoke the Diaspora and claim Africa as a site of origin, these heritage tourists appear to completely subvert the definition of national identity by traverse beyond the American nation-state (Clifford 250). And yet, there remains a paradox. As Aiwha Ong suggests in her analysis of Chinese transnational communities in *Flexible Citizenship*, such a reading of diasporic travel tends to "overlook complicated accommodations, alliances, and creative tensions between the nation-state and mobile capital, between disapora and nationalism" (16). Ong's argument is particularly instructive here because these coming-home tours not only predicate themselves on the imagined community of the African Diaspora, but simultaneously project a nationalist myth of what I call "African American exceptionalism." As used here, African American exceptionalism describes an interpretative process and ideological project in which African Americans "map" their unique history of American slavery, segregation, and post-Civil Rights racism onto the racial histories of non-US subjects and places.

SENEGAL IN BLACK AND WHITE: THE AFTER-LIFE OF SLAVERY[3]

In the absence of national heritage sites that commemorate enslaved African Americans in the United States, African Americans photographers Chester Higgins and Carrie Mae Weems traveled to Gorée Island, Senegal, to locate physical monuments of the slave trade, and thereby engage in a formal remembrance of the lives and experiences of their enslaved ancestors. By privileging and reconstructing the House of Slaves at Gorée Island as the visual symbol of the entire slave trade, Higgins and Weems are able to remember slavery and reclaim Africa as an originary site of African American identity. And as they reclaim Gorée Island as a starting point of the slave trade and therefore the genesis of African American culture, both Higgins and Weems initiate new myths of belongings and beginnings for post-Civil Rights African Americans. By asserting their allegiance and membership in the larger "imagined community" of the African Diaspora, African Americans resist their civic estrangement in the United States. However, like any other myth of civic belonging, the myth of the African Diaspora excludes those interpretations of the past and experiences in the present that disrupt the historical authenticity of these narratives.

While remembering Gorée Island as a slave fort provides African Americans with alternative heritage sites and literally memorializesthe countermyth of the African Diaspora, it also erases or marginalizes those histories and present-day realities that challenge what Saidiya Hartman describes as "the distinctly American narrative of captivity, deportment, and slavery" ("Time of Slavery" 770). By deliberately privileging Gorée as the ultimate symbol of the slave trade despite debates about its historical role in the Middle Passage—and by erasing the presence of other tourists or the local Senegalese inhabitants who actually live and work on the same island—they perpetuate a myth of the African Diaspora that gives preference to African American interpretations of slavery. Here, the African American heritage tourist sees Senegal only through the gaze of remembrance. Chester Higgins awaited his first trip to Africa with baited breath: "I was full of anticipation. Finally, I was to discover for myself the parallel black reality I had nourished in my imagination. . . . One that first trip, I began a lifelong study of the mannerisms, culture, and traditions of African people; mirror images of the people

of my childhood" ("Into Africa"). For the last thirty years, Higgins has traveled to Africa several times, using his camera "to discover, confront, examine, and depict—through dispersions and connection—the existence of people of African descent" (*Feeling the Spirit* 9). This odyssey culminated in Higgins's *Feeling The Spirit: Searching the World for the People of Africa* (1994), which documents what he describes as the "historical ruptures" (37) and "divisions" ("Interview") among "the peoples of Africa" initially caused by slavery, segregation, and apartheid—now sustained by racism and ethnic conflict. While a shared, ongoing history of displacement, divisions, and rifts in identity birthed the present-day discourse of the African Diaspora, Higgins is clear that the goal of *Feeling the Spirit* is not to emphasize geographical distinctions but rather to reveal "the affinities between residents of Africa and their far-flung relatives dispersed by slavery" (qtd. in Hughes). As Higgins insists, "*Feeling the Spirit* is about dispersion and connections. Today, African people live on four transatlantic continents in many different nations. We are a diverse people. Although we are separated by geography, national boundaries, and language, we are still similar in the ways that bind us together. In our diversity we are much alike" (*Feeling the Spirit* 8). Here, Higgins's praise for the "diversity" of the African Diaspora draws upon an American discourse of plurality and democracy. Ironically, in his semantic attempt to move beyond the nation-state and connect to a larger transnational black community, he stresses an almost uniquely American preoccupation and thus reinforces an identity that locates him, ideologically, within the US. Nevertheless, Higgins's photographs provide a visual narrative of an African Diaspora that, as Paul Gilroy articulates in *The Black Atlantic*, challenges "both the structures of the nation-state and the constraints of ethnicity and national particularity" (19). Replacing the nation-state as the site of origin with the African Diaspora, Higgins's *Feeling the Spirit* provides a visual genealogy of transnationalism that allows both him and his African American subjects to transcend the racial exclusivity of their "home": the United States.

Like national civic myths that transmit the fiction of collective histories to its citizenry, the myth of the African Diaspora also requires tropes of unity and continuity. Both myth-making processes either forget or marginalize aspects of the past in order to sustain doctrines of coherence and consensus. In an effort to protect and perpetuate the ideology of an uncompromised American democracy, American civic myths mandate the exorcism of colonialism and slavery from the national memory. While narratives of the African Diaspora often attempt to address the racial exclusivity of national myths, they do so by inventing counternarratives of transnational racial solidarity. Instead of prescribing national allegiance, such myths of transnationalism dissolve the nation-state by emphasizing commonalties that transcends geographical, linguistic, or even ethnic difference. For example, in an effort to reveal how "in our diversity we are much alike" (Higgins, *Feeling the Spirit* 8). Higgins arranges his collection of photographs "by sticking different places and parts of the Diaspora right next to each other" ("Interview"). Instead of portraying his individual subjects in the context of their national or ethnic backgrounds, Higgins erases—or, in his words, "eliminates"—their borders in order to reconcile the divisions constituted by forced movement and displacement ("Interview"). In the spirit of Stuart Hall's brilliant analysis of Jamaican-born photographer Armet Francis in the essay "Cultural Identity and the Diaspora," I also would argue that Higgins endeavors to reconstruct visually "the underlying

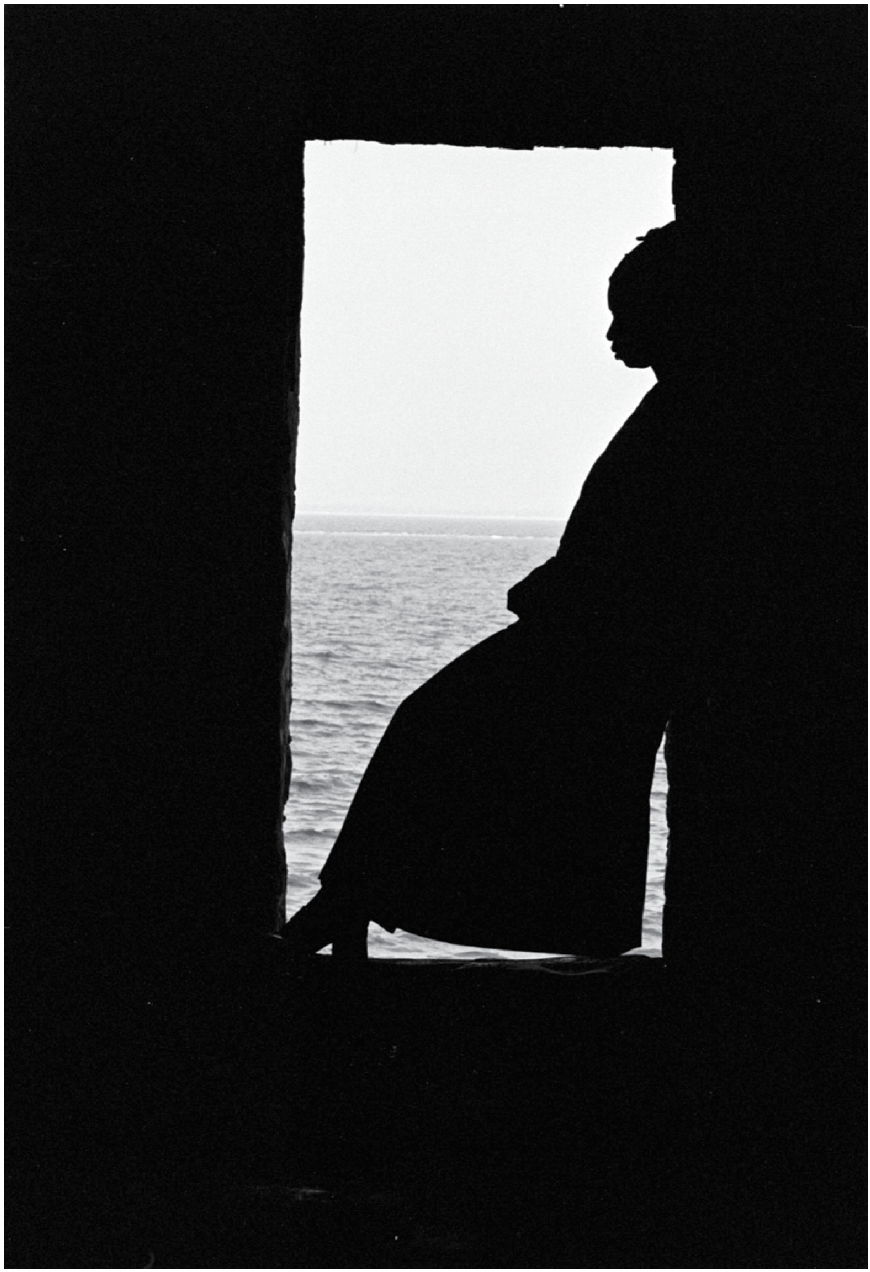

Figure 1. Chester Higgins, "The House of Slaves at the Door of No Return" (1972). Reproduced in Chester Higgins, *Feeling the Spirit: Searching the World for the People of Africa*, New York: Bantam, 1994. With the permission of Chester Higgins.

unity of the black people whom slavery and colonization distributed across the African Diaspora. His text, "like that of Francis "is an act of imaginary unification" (Hall 224).

Although Higgins has traveled to Gorée Island twelve or more times, I am especially interested in the way he constructs the African Diaspora in one of his earliest black and white photographs of Gorée Island, "The Door of No Return in the House of Slaves" (Fig. 1.). For it is constitutive of his broader vision of the African Diaspora and offers insight about impulses that would shape the trajectory of future work. In the "Middle Passage" section of the book, Higgins begins his visual narrative at the House of Slaves at Gorée Island, Senegal, but then follows these photographs with a documentation of "the People of Africa" who, judging by the title *Feeling the Spirit: The People of Africa*, presumably constitute the African Diaspora. This collection of photographs takes the viewer from the House of Slaves to the African burial ground in Manhattan, to former slave cabins in South Carolina, to a memorial service at Coney Island, New York, in honor of the millions of enslaved Africans who died in the Middle Passage—from the Celebration of the "Oath of Bois Caiman" in Haiti, which inaugurated the Haitian Revolution, to the Sisterhood of the Good Death ceremony that acknowledges the end of slavery in Brazil.[4] Like with his arrangement of photographs throughout *Feeling the Spirit,* Higgins did not arbitrarily place the photographs of the "Middle Passage" series alongside each other, but compiled them as a joint history of African captivity, the middle passage, and New World racial discrimination. Higgins's placement of these photographs allows him to create a visual saga in which the genealogy of the African Diaspora literally begins at the slave fort and culminates in New World ceremonies that remember the rebellious history of enslaved Africans. By positioning the House of Slaves as the nascent point for all members of the African Diaspora, Higgins supplements their histories of dispersal with what Stuart Hall describes as "an imaginary fullness or plentitude" (225). By reconfiguring the slave fort as the symbol of departure and the site to which Diasporic blacks should return, Higgins's "Middle Passage" series is a visual text in which returning to Africa becomes both a transnational act of resistance and a commemoration of slavery's past.

For Higgins, "The structure of [the House of Slaves] stands as a horrifying physical reminder that human beings are capable of enslaving each other" (*Feeling the Spirit* 36). The interior of the House of Slaves holds "the terror in the cramped, awful dungeons where Europeans enacted unspeakable crimes against African men, women, and children, trying to strip them of their humanity" (36). As such, the slave fort becomes the symbol of the forced separation and loss of identity that enslaved Africans experienced on the shores of West Africa, on the slave ships, and in the New World. In the photograph "The Door of No Return in the House of Slaves," Higgins reinforces this sense of separation by foregrounding the silhouette of young, black woman against a mysterious, ceaseless Atlantic Ocean. Historically, "The Door of No Return" was allegedly the last view of Africa for enslaved Africans placed on ships destined for the New World. As a result, the door represents the "process and the condition" of the African Diaspora (Patterson and Kelley 20)—the coerced transference of cultures, languages, and bodies from the Old World to the New World. Because of the astounding darkness enveloping the silhouette at center, the borders around "the Door" in Higgins's photograph

are even more pronounced. In the midst of darkness that envelopes the room, leading out, past our female subject's body, into the Atlantic Ocean, the only source of light comes from beyond the frame of the photograph itself. This source, which enters the scene from beyond the door, consists of sunlight bounced against and reflected from the Atlantic Ocean, is the sun's reflection. As the sun hovers over the Atlantic Ocean, it simultaneously illuminates the haunting darkness of the House of Slaves. As a result, the doorway becomes the most significant object for the viewer. Even as our gaze is drawn to the camera's point of focus upon the Atlantic horizon (a perspective that in fact simulates the last memory before dispersal), the darkness of the silhouette and the doorway pulls us closer towards the Door of No Return. Since the doorway is occupied by the young woman who stands at the intersection of darkness and blinding light—or between Africa and the New World—there are no objects competing for the viewer's attention: she, like us, concentrates on the doorframe, the rectangular lines that separate her body from both the camera and the background. In this way, she both inhabits and becomes the symbol that initiates the break between Africa and the daunting currents of the Atlantic Ocean. Her body, the doorframe, and the actual frame of the photograph not only dramatize the threshold between the Old World and the New World, but also remind the viewer of the unnatural limitations of borders, boundaries, and the nation-state itself. Additionally, due to the photograph's underexposure, the overwhelming darkness that foregrounds her silhouette *appears* to match the color of her body, her face, and her ethnicity. Because the darkness (really, the blackness) is so encompassing, our subject's facial features are difficult to discern. So in addition to reenacting the moment of separation that constituted the African Diaspora, her anonymity further symbolizes the eternal loss of individuality imposed on enslaved Africans at the slave fort.

Yet, despite being the site of separation, Higgins portrays the slave fort as the ultimate site of reunification—the place that stripped Africans of their humanity but one to which we must return in order restore our memories of Africa as home. By creating a silhouette, Higgins manifests a visual image of continuity and unity within the African Diaspora. Paradoxically, her anonymity is a stand-in for the lost histories and voices of "some 10 million African men, women, and children [who] passed through the dungeons in the House of Slaves on their way to the slave labor markets" (*Feeling the Spirit* 42), her ambiguity also represents the fluidity of transnational identities. Because a silhouette is designed to outline shapes and forms, there are no discernable markers of her ethnicity or nationality. Because we cannot locate her particular site of origin, we cannot essentialize her nationality as American, Jamaican, Brazilian, or Senegalese. While the silhouette forces the viewer to remember the thousands of Africans who forcibly left their homes and families in Africa, the young woman also inhabits the space-in-between Africa and the Atlantic Ocean, or what James Clifford describes as "the co-presence of here and there" which creates the African Diaspora consciousness (Clifford 264). She leans against "The Door of No Return" in order reclaim the monument but fills in "the violent absence" caused by slavery with what Sandra L. Richards characterizes as the materiality of the tourist's body and becomes a stand-in for those whose names can no longer be recalled (626). And by doing so, she provides a heretofore unknown subjectivity for those enslaved Africans who violently left the shores of West Africa for the New World and becomes the prodigal daughter

who claims her inheritance of both the slave fort and the memories of all those who were forced to leave.

Her darkness suggests that she is from anywhere in black world, but her nonspecificity claims nowhere. As such, she truly becomes Higgins's "citizen of the world" in which African Diaspora myths of similarity and belonging subsume markers of difference ("Interview"). But in addition to presenting a prodigal daughter, the feminized triangular shape of the silhouette also suggests a re-centering of Africa as both the beginning of the "triangular" slave trade and the "mother" of the African Diaspora. To quote Hall again, imaginary coherence of the African Diaspora is restored by figuring Africa as "the mother of these different civilizations . . . for Africa is the missing term, the great aporia, which lies at the centre of our cultural identity and gives it a meaning which, until recently it lacked" (224). In order to reconcile the ongoing sense of fragmentation and historical displacement that defines post-Civil Rights African-American identity, Higgins depicts "The Door of No Return" as the monument to which African Americans must return and the silhouette as a nascent point. It is only through the process of reclaiming and memorializing this slave fort that African Americans can supplement narratives of dispersal with Pan-African fictions of healing and wholeness.

Like Chester Higgins, photographer Carrie Mae Weems returned to West Africa in order "to gain a first hand understanding of the way that Africa had impacted both her and America" (Piché 17). In 1993, immediately after finishing the *Sea Island Series* in which she examined the legacy of slavery in the United States by capturing the landscape of the coastal islands of the American South, Weems decided that she wanted to visit what she calls "the vestiges of slavery: the slave ports, forts, castles, along the coast of Ghana, El Mina, Cape Coast, and Ile de Gorée" (Piché 17). While in the *Sea Island Series* Weems focused on the remnants or traces of slavery in the United States, like praise houses, graveyards, and abandoned slave quarters, Weems traveled to West Africa in order to see formal remembrances of the slave trade. By returning to Africa in order to locate remnants of the transatlantic slave trade that she could not find in the American South, Weems reverses the middle passage journey from West Africa to the New World and creates a visual genealogy that both centers and deconstructs Africa as a site of origin. On one hand, by following the *Sea Island Series* with the *Africa Series*, Weems articulates a vision of the African Diaspora which features "an African lineage that has survived despite slavery, colonial rule, and French assimilation policies . . . it is a shared history of slavery that creates a common bond between Senegal and the United States" (Jacobs 12). Through documenting both the coasts upon which enslaved Africans arrived in the New World such as Charleston, South Carolina and the forts at which they left Africa for the New World, Weems also turns to Africa in order to create an alternative transnational discourse of origins and belonging. Thomas Piché, Jr., describes Weems's *Africa Series* as a myth-making process in which she "creates a fiction out of the truths she encounters rather than finds a truth deep within fictions. Rather than looking to Africa [as she did in the *Sea Island Series*], she goes to Africa" (33)

Yet, while Weems weaves a diasporic myth that allows her both to claim Africa as a site of origin and resist the racial exclusivity of American nationalism, she, unlike Higgins, emphasizes the moments of ruptures and discontinuities that also comprise the African Diaspora. These thematic distinctions are in fact

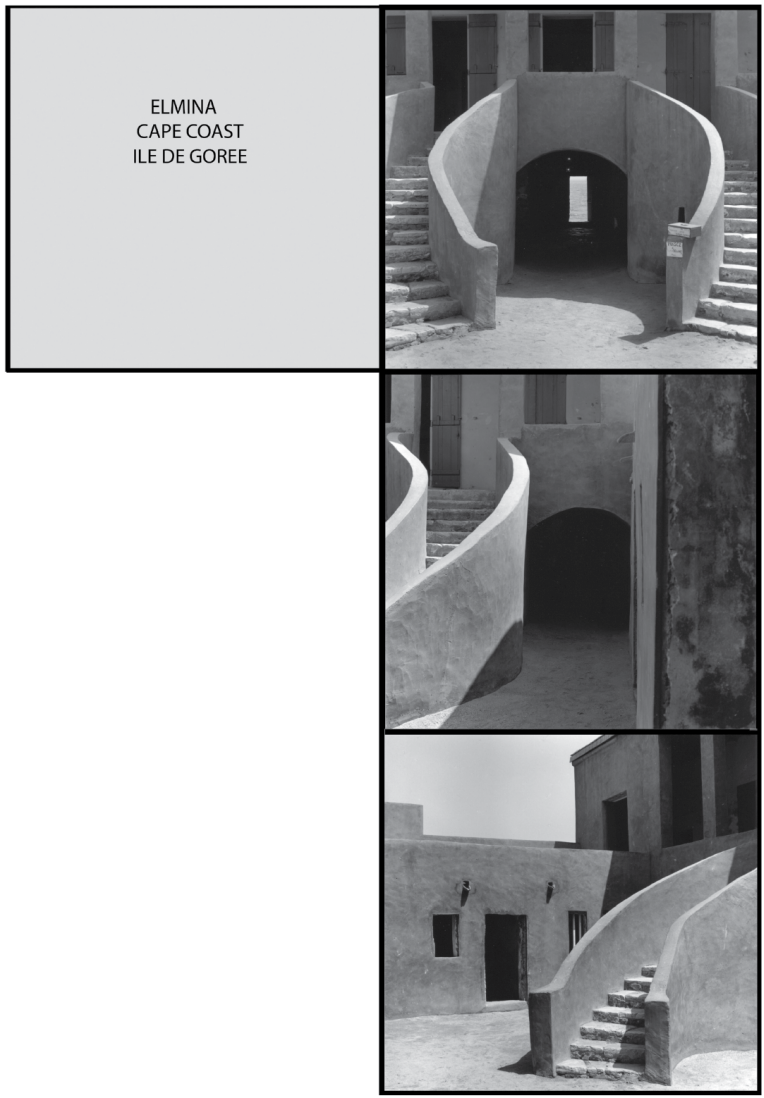

Figure 2. Carrie Mae Weems, "Elmina Cape Coast Ile de Gorée" from *The Slave Coast Series*, New York: PPOW, 1993. With the permission of Carrie Mae Weems.

ideological differences based on the temporal frame in which these photographs were produced. Originating in 1972 and on the heels of the Civil Rights Movement, Higgins's "The Door of No Return at the House of Slaves" (Fig. 2) emblematizes a Black Power vision of the African Diaspora in which international black solidarity and racial unity supplant fidelity to, and faith in, the American nation-state. Unlike "an act of imaginary reunification" that Higgins's photograph inscribes, the identity politics of and the intellectual and social debates that took place in the 1980s and early 1990s greatly inform Weems's project. Characterizing the anti-essentialist and post-structuralist discourse of scholars like Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Paul Gilroy, Kwame Anthony Appiah, Michelle Wallace, and bell hooks, Weems's images are ones that Stuart Hall would describe as recognizing the "critical points of deep and significant difference which constitute 'what we really are'; or rather—since history has intervened—what we have become" (Hall 225). Thus, the transnational myth of the Africa Diaspora that Weems represents at Gorée Island is both a story of common histories and a narrative of fragmentation and difference. The photographs of Carrie Mae Weems's *Slave Coast Series* thus likewise uphold the African Diaspora as an alternative imagined community but with quite different implications, suggesting that while the need for a counter civic culture has remained constant throughout the post-Civil Rights era, there is not a singular or hegemonic remembrance or configuration of the African Diaspora.

Weems's myth of an African Diaspora in which inflections of difference are as, or even more important than those of sameness, is embodied in the silver gelatin print titled "El Mina Cape Coast Ile de Gorée" (figure 1.2) from the *Slave Coast Series*. Although the title and accompanying text suggest that the triptych includes all three forts, the actual photograph features three different views of The House of Slaves at Gorée Island. By conflating all three forts, Weems deemphasizes their respective locations in the nation-states of Senegal and Ghana and consolidates them into one singular image of the slave trade and beginning of the African Diaspora. Yet while her text provides a narrative of wholeness and oneness, the accompanying photograph undermines the sense of continuity for which she strives. "El Mina Cape Coast Ile de Gorée" is a vertical triptych of the famous staircase of "The House of the Slaves." In the first photograph, there is a close-up, frontal shot of the entire stair case with a miniaturized view of "The Door of No Return" functioning as the focal point. Unlike Higgins' photograph, because there are no people in Weems's reconstruction of "The Door of No Return," the architecture alone resurrects the foreboding spirit of the slave trade. Instead of having a silhouette remind the viewer of the slave trade's ghastly, and ghostly, traces, Weems simply situates the darkness that surrounds the Door of No Return between the bright sunlight that comes from the inner courtyard and from the Atlantic Ocean to emphasize the historical significance of the port. Shrouded by light, the Door of No Return appears so small, so seemingly benign, that its role as the final gateway between life in Africa and New World slavery seems even more disturbing and dehumanizing. Cheryl Finley notes in *Imagining African Art* that by removing "any signs of life" from Gorée Island, "Weems reconstructs a "mood [that] is silent, solemn, chilling, and empty" (26).

Weems works to recreate the feelings of confinement, dismemberment, and displacement through her manipulation of the architecture of Gorée Island. In contrast to the wide-angle shot of the staircase in the first image of the triptych,

the second and third images are side-angle shots of the staircase. The second photograph features only the top of the left side of the staircase, while the third of the triptychs appears to be the view taken from top of the staircase in the second photograph—only revealing the bottom part of the right staircase and the quarters reserved for enslaved men that stands right behind it. The vertical placement of the photographs force the viewer's eye to travel along the staircase, while the side-angle shots upset the sequential order of such travel. Instead of traveling up and down the staircase in one fluid motion, as in the first photograph, the second and third photographs discourage the viewer from recreating a narrative of wholeness and stability. Instead, these images stacked on top of each other suggest the ruptures and discontinuities that constitute Weems's version of diaspora. They materialize what Hall refers to as a view of the African Diaspora in which "identity does not proceed, in a straight unbroken line, from some fixed origin" (226). Instead of representing the Diaspora as singular and intact, Weems breaks up the staircase to suggest a sense of transformation and movement. She recreates the House of Slaves as a point of origin that parented unwanted mobility and coerced travel and harkens back to the mass exodus out of the Door of No Return and the attendant tortuous journey of the Middle Passage. Here, both the use of the triptych, the vertical placement of the prints, and the actual images contained in the photographs produce an image of the African Diaspora that both deconstructs the myth of reunification and privileges sites of cultural difference. However, by placing difference "in and alongside continuity" (Hall 227), Weems's Diaspora does not simply replace the desire for wholeness and civic belonging with a reality of fragmentation and civic alienation.

Through re-appropriating the slave fort as the originary point of identity, Weems reaffirms African American claims of historical connection to Africa and legitimates their membership in the African Diaspora. As a result, the fragmentation of the staircase can be read as both a visual recognition of cultural difference and as a commemoration of diversity. The focus on the staircase, as opposed to the Door of No Return, suggests movement and flexibility. Weems underscores that despite the literal rigidity of the structure of the slave fort, or better yet the durability of American racism, the African American traveler can return to Africa in order to reclaim the slave fort and reshape its historical meaning. While the side-angle shots suggest discontinuity, they also hint at heterogeneity and plurality. These photographs allow the viewer to understand the House of Slaves and the memory of slavery from multiple perspectives and viewpoints, thereby resisting the impulse to proceed with authoritative notions of the past. By providing the viewer with these varied images of the slave fort, Weems also reminds us about diasporic difference and the diversity of all those who left these shores for the New World. Like Higgins's photograph, Weems's triptych also fills in the missing bodies and the forgotten histories of enslaved Africans. But instead of using the solitary figure of a silhouette to supplement the void left by slavery, Weems replaces their absence with different perspectives concerning the same object: or the polyphonic voices that initiated and continue to make up the African Diaspora. Brilliantly, in capturing difference by depicting multiple viewpoints, Weems's triptych contains a civic myth of the African Diaspora that embodies the qualities of democracy and open-endedness denied to African Americans in the United States.

In the distinctions between the way Higgins and Weems reconstruct the House of Slaves as a metaphor of the African Diaspora they create, to borrow a phrase from Smadar Lavie, "a frame of analysis that resists and transcends national boundaries" (15). Their transnational myths allow them to bypass the civic estrangement of post-Civil Rights African Americans in the United States. In many ways, their photographs embody what Victor Turner defined as "liminality," or a state of being in which subjects are "neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between" (Turner 94). Their depictions of the House of Slaves construct alternative civic myths that challenge American national memory, while re-centering these fictions within an African American historical framework. The fort resides in Africa yet becomes American. As such, Higgins and Weems reproduce a narrative of returning to Africa in which "Africa" is always seen not as it is presently is, but through "the backwards glance or hindsight" Hartman 763). In order to remember the House of the Slaves as it once was, as a site of trauma for thousands of enslaved Africans, "Africa" and the slave fort itself can only be signifiers of historical violence and loss. Yet, to keep the aspects of "authenticity" that make Gorée Island both a world heritage site and a popular tourist destination, Higgins and Weems use the authoritative gaze of black and white photography and privilege absence to make the viewer remember the histories and experiences of those enslaved Africans who unknowingly departed for the New World.

Unfortunately, in order to visually reproduce and preserve the House of Slaves as a heritage site, Higgins and Weems reconstruct the present-day House of Slaves only as an extension of the past—as such, they seem to position both Gorée Island, and by extension all of Senegal, "in a chronological period in which time has either stopped, or the past is identical to the present" (Richards 636). So, unlike the previous Back to Africa movements in which African American emigrants and expatriates engaged the African politics of their respective periods because "Africa" represented a potential site for political sovereignty and racial equality, the post-Civil Rights discourse does not invoke "Africa" as a substitute homeland. The re-positioning of Africa as an extension of remembering American slavery within the African-American consciousness is a direct consequence of the post-Civil Rights African American political position of legal citizenship and civic estrangement. In order to compensate for their exclusion from civic narratives, they reconstitute "Africa" as a site of a shared, common history. Not at all coincidentally, Higgins and Weems shoot in black and white. Although their images are taken outside of the United States, both Higgins and Weems borrow from the American social documentary tradition in which black and white photography conveys a sense of "authenticity." Black and white photography tends to invoke a sense of gravitas, stillness, and the past. For example, a color photograph of the House of Slaves reveals that the imposing staircase and the adjoining walls in the courtyard, which is a brilliant white in Weems's photograph, is actually a fading terracotta color.[5] These rust-hued stairs do not lead up to black doors but ones that pale yellow walls frame and really are sage green. In contrast to the stillness and the solemnity that Weems's black and white photograph conveys and the absolute blackness of Higgins's picture, the bright colors of the actual House of Slaves imbue the landscape with a sense of energy, warmth, and movement. By capturing the realism of the House of Slaves through color photography, Higgins

and Weems risk disrupting the tourist gaze of Gorée Island as both "sacred" and "heritage." In order to recreate the sense of haunting that they felt and other African American heritage tourists expect to experience at Gorée Island, Higgins and Weems transport the House of Slaves from its present-day color and warmth and attempt to put it back in its "authentic" role as a slave fort.

By erasing the color of the building, Higgins and Weems do not recreate Gorée Island as it once was (for it was not necessarily a white building in a darkened landscape); rather, they reconstruct Gorée as they want it to be remembered. Instead of allowing viewers to reconcile the feelings of discontinuity and discomfort that they may have with an image of brightly lit and somewhat welcoming tropical building, Higgins and Weems visually restructure the fort as a permanent reflection of, or monument to, the past. Vilém Flusser has argued that in addition to removing color to fix an image in the remote past, black and white photographs bear the badge of authenticity because they create the illusion that the world, when broken into black and white and thus perfectly opposable elements becomes more "accessible to logical analysis"(Flusser 42). In *Spectral Evidence,* Ulrich Baer applies Flusser's philosophy of black and white photography to readings of contemporary photographs of Holocaust landscapes in which "the abstractions of *true* and *false* and *good* and *evil,* which predate the invention of photography, seems to find their representational correlates in black and white photographs" (Baer 152). Flusser's arguments can be extended to a transatlantic slave trade landscape in which the abstractions of slavery and freedom also correspond to the polarity embedded in black and white photography. By that I mean that like the opposing elements of slavery and resistance or slavery and freedom, black and white photography render the intangibility of these concepts real and accessible to the viewer. While color distracts and would most likely make us forget the feeling of loss associated with slavery, black and white forces the viewer to reconcile the strict binaries through which we interpret the picture, but more important, they symbolize the rigid laws of citizenship and nonbelonging under which enslaved Africans lived.

The use of black and white photography here also reveals the political underpinnings of the post-Civil Rights African American Back to Africa discourse that represents "Africa" as a site of slavery only. According to historian James W. Meriwether, in the 1970s and 1980s, "African Americans faced a situation in which . . . the historic imagining of Africa as a more or less unified whole could not be sustained in a world of radical nationalists, authoritarian strongmen, military coups, and democratic hopefuls" (243). In place of liberating "Africa" from European imperialists as African American believed they must do in the 1960s, in the early 1990s African Americans initially organized against South Africa's apartheid. Nevertheless, as South Africa eventually came under black majority rule, it also "marked the last point at which African-Americans could focus in the appealing simplicity of black and white politics in Africa" (Meriwether 244). As a result, post-Civil Rights African Americans devised new relationships with and new images of "Africa" since they had finally gained full legal citizenship in the United States and because of the configuration of new African nation-states and internecine conflicts. However, as the rise in heritage tourism to the slave forts indicates, contemporary African American heritage tourists are more likely to emphasize those aspects of African history that directly reflect their need to remember slavery. Because Senegal is neither a site of potential racial freedom nor, as Meriwether suggests, a

site of overt racial oppression, African Americans may have difficulty engaging with its present-day postcolonial conflicts. For now, Senegal serves primarily as a site of origins and as Higgins's and Weems's photographs of the House of Slaves reveal, literally remembered in terms of black and white.

According to Cheryl Finley, Gorée Island is normally "teeming with life, visited annually by thousands of pilgrims from the Diaspora and tourists around the globe" ("Carrie Mae Weems" 26). And even though the House of Slaves at Gorée Island is one of the most lucrative tourist sites in Senegal, especially among African Americans, the bodies of tourists, in the photographs by Higgins and Weems, are conspicuously absent. In addition to erasing the dearth of tourists, Higgins and Weems also erase the presence of the Senegalese inhabitants who live at Gorée Island and the fishermen and the House of Slaves employees who work on the island. By removing these people and reconstructing Gorée Island as "a space of absence" (Baer 18), their photographs obliterate any present-day traces of Gorée Island as a place of tourist activity and maritime commerce and reconstitute it only as a monument of the transatlantic slave trade. Instead of interacting with present-day Senegal, Higgins and Weems, through their photographs, recreate the sense of displacement and rupture felt by the enslaved Africans and reestablish the feelings of loss and mourning experienced by the heritage tourists. Because of their deliberate emphasis of absence, they represent the House of Slaves as a silent witness to the trauma and the forgotten histories of the millions of Africans forced to travel to the New World. However, the emptiness of the slave fort here also relegates all Gorée Island to the mnemonic domain of the African American heritage tourists who feel compelled to travel to Africa in order to supplant the national amnesia of slavery in the United States and locate alternative ancestral origins. Ironically, not only do the missing bodies of tourists and the local denizens constitute the space of absence in Higgins's and Weems's photographs, but so does the erasure of all markers of present-day Senegal. Their pictures induce the viewer to remember slavery through voids, erasures, and absences. Much like the effects of their use of black and white photography, they recover the traumatic experiences of enslaved Africans at the House of Slaves by removing any signs of life or contemporaneity.

Unlike Weems's photograph, which creates absence through invoking and disrupting the tradition of landscape art, Higgins's "The Door of No Return at the House of Slaves" creates absence through a re-enactment of solitude. The darkness in the photograph is so overwhelming that it literally engulfs the woman's body. Given that the only source of light is the blinding sun opposing the photographer's camera, the entire photograph reveals the conflict between the plentitude of darkness that appears to bleed out of the picture and the absence of light in the room. On a symbolic level, Higgins fills in the violent absence caused by slavery with the materiality and corporeality of the woman's body. In fact, like the heritage site itself, her presence at the Door of No Return appears to be an act of reclaiming and commemorating her enslaved ancestors. Ironically, while the silhouette suggests a sense of Diasporic wholeness, it also conveys a state of perpetual lack. As she leans against the Door of No Return, she is still, almost lifeless, and contemplative. By looking down at the floor and evading eye contact with the camera and the ocean, she stands in a trance-like state and risks isolation from the activities or persons that are, we might infer, around her. The combination of a confounding darkness,

the ambiguity of the silhouette, and her crouching body all sustain the idea that the fort is a place of mourning and meditation. Furthermore, the absolute solitude of her figure reproduces, rather than replaces, the space of the fort as permanently marked by absence. Besides the outline of her body, the most dominant image in the photograph is that of blank darkness. And through this darkness, we are confronted with the unfamiliar and haunting waves of the Atlantic Ocean.

Given our point of view, the Door of No Return is foreboding and unwelcoming, the darkness is dwarfing and atomizing, and the ocean restless and weary. So by removing competing objects and thereby contending narratives, Higgins's "The Door of No Return at the House of Slaves" and its depiction of the Door of No Return serve simply as symbols of slavery, and nothing else. Although the photograph is taken in Senegal, there are no markers of national identity or time period. In fact, we only know that it is Senegal because Higgins's caption informs us as much. But for the most part, contemporary Senegalese culture is absent and replaced with an image of a slave fort that is exclusively locked into the parameters of American slavery and African American return. Through the juxtaposition of light and darkness and the invocation of absence through the loneliness of the silhouette, Higgins reproduces the feelings of desertion, dismemberment, and lack that we associate with the transatlantic slave trade and the Middle Passage. However, by foregrounding absence, Higgins either disentangles us from the present or renders the present filled with lack. Either way, the viewer does not have a sense of modern-day Gorée Island. As a result, the transnational stories of the Diaspora, of which modern Senegal is inevitably apart, are sacrificed and replaced with the civic myth of the African Diaspora that transcends the racial limitations of American national memory but re-centers those African American perspectives of slavery that are forgotten in United States.

Instead of recreating absence through juxtaposition, Carrie Mae Weems's "Elmina Cape Coast Ile de Goree" omits any people or objects that would compromise the historical significance of The House of Slaves. In an interview about her trip to West Africa, Weems admits: "It wasn't the experience I expected, it was much more complicated than claiming roots, I felt methodical and emotionally distant. I had to deal with my emotions later" (qtd. in Piché 17). For Weems, the House of Slaves was not simply a site to reclaim, but one that contains and yields the indescribable emotions of mourning and permanent loss. Because of her emotional distance, Weems chose to photograph the architecture of the House of Slaves. Through displaying the emptiness of Gorée Island that Weems's photograph attempts to produce, not the lack imposed by enslavement, but rather her inability fully to express the horror and terror that slavery created. Weems's photograph visualizes W. J. T. Mitchell's argument in the essay "Narrative, Memory, and Slavery" that the contemporary African American representations on slavery reveal a "psychical process of disremembering the trauma of slavery, of repressing a horrific experience that can be never be fully known, in order to remember what can never be fully understood" (183–207; see also Shaw 42). In the case of Weems, the unspeakability and the incomprehensibility of slavery occur in the absoluteness of Nothingness in her landscape. As Baer notes in regards to photographs of Holocaust landscapes: "For the nothing to be translated into sight, it must be shown as nothing" (75). Likewise, for Weems to reconstruct the feelings of loss and

abandonment that she associated with the slave trade, she, like the slave traders themselves, exorcises the entire fort of the bodies and remnants of the enslaved Africans. In order to acknowledge their presences, she accents their absences.

Although Higgins and Weems both reconstruct the House of Slaves as a metaphor for the African Diaspora—Higgins as a site of "imaginary reunification" and Weems as a site of inflected difference—their representational concerns originate with the need to locate heritage sites that remember American slavery. And in spite of some of their ideological distinctions, both photographers conclude their depictions of "The House of Slaves" by effectively creating and simultaneously undermining the transnational myth of the African Diaspora to which their photographs lay claim. On one hand, these photographs reveal Higgins's and Weems's re-appropriation of the Senegalese slave fort as a generative marker of identity that transcends and visually supplements the racial exclusivity of American civic myths of belonging and historical commonality. On the other hand, by sanctifying the House of Slaves as the constitutive site of the African Diaspora, their photographs erase and marginalize those histories and present-day realities that challenge the myth of the African Diaspora. Within the context of heritage tourism, travel to the interior lands of Senegal is tangential and the present-day government of Senegal in and of itself can be secondary or, as anthropologist Paulla Ebron notes, "seem irrelevant, even antithetical" to the larger and more personal mission of self-discovery and re-memory" (920). Consequently, "Africa" becomes fixed in the pre-colonial slave trade and the Back to Africa discourse in which "slave fort" and "Africa" are interchangeable signifiers for the African Diaspora political identities (Scott 263).

NOTES

1. On July 8, 2003, President George W. Bush also traveled to Gorée Island and offered a critique of the *sin* of slavery without putting forth a presidential apology. However, unlike Clinton's trip, Bush's sojourn was substantially more controversial and divisive in Senegal. For a detailed and insightful examination on Bush's trip to Senegal and on how many Senegalese citizens understand the coercive practices that both the American and Senegalese governments employed in order to "protect" Bush as reproducing "the way enslavement historically worked at Gorée Island," see Ralph.

2. For a wonderful summary of the debates among French, Senegalese, and American historians about the commercial significance of Gorée Island in the transatlantic trade, see Hinchman.

3. I borrow this term from Saidiya Hartman's memoir, *Lose Your Mother* (6).

4. The Oath of Bois Caiman commemorates a ceremony held by some of the Haitian slaves plotting rebellion in the North in the Bois Caiman, Haiti, that most likely occurred on the night of 21 August 1791. According to legend, the ceremony was presided over by one of the prospective leaders of the rebellion, Boukman, and involved the slaughter of a black pig, and the drinking of its blood by those assembled, who then swore obedience to Boukman. The accepted view of the importance of the voodoo religion in the organization of the slave insurrection, in fact, rests heavily upon this particular instance. Each year, from August 13 to 15, the Boa Morte sisterhood, a group of mostly elderly women descended from African slaves, put on their finest ceremonial clothes and jewelry to participate in three days of Masses, parades, public feasts, and dancing in honor of the Virgin Mary. On the surface, the festival is purely, ardently Catholic, but the reality is more complicated. The name of the festival refers not only

to the good death of Mary, who, according to scripture, ascended into heaven, but to slaves who managed to become free during their lifetimes.

5. It must be noted that the terra cotta-toned plaster at the House of Slaves was actually much lighter in color before its "restoration" as a World Heritage Site. According to Mark Hinchman, "A panel inside the house openly states that red is not the house's original color, and suggests that red (because it is the color of spilled blood?) better represents the memory of the trade."

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