Carrie Mae Weems (b. 1953) is an American artist who has worked in photography and video since the 1980s, often combining text with images to explore complex histories of race, gender, and class identities in America.

**ABOUT UNTITLED (COLORED PEOPLE GRID)**

*Untitled (Colored People Grid)* consists of a grid of monochromatic square panels that are interspersed with individual photographs of African American adolescents that Weems altered with overlays of magenta, yellow, burnt orange, blue, brown, and purple.

With *Untitled (Colored People Grid)* Weems reworks an earlier series titled *Colored People*, first created in 1989–90, in which she produced tinted portraits of black youths as a means of parodying the simplistic construct of applying a color term to any human being, no one of whom is actually white or black. Weems photographed her models at an age, as she describes, “when issues of race really begin to affect you, at the point of an innocence beginning to be disrupted.”¹ Use of the term colored to describe people goes back to the early nineteenth century. Like Negro, it fell out of favor around 1960 and was replaced with terms such as black, African American, and of color. In *Colored People*, Weems explored these terms by added labels to each group of images, such as “Blue Black Boy” and “Golden Yella Girl.” The *Colored People* series investigates the beauty found in the range of skin colors encompassed within the term black while also critiquing the hierarchy of social values assigned to skin tones within the African American community itself.

She does not use text in *Untitled (Colored People Grid)*, choosing instead to juxtapose color, photographic portraits, and negative space to explore ideas of individuality and community within the African American populace. *Untitled (Colored People Grid)* invites multiple interpretations as Weems reclaims a pejorative term used to identify African Americans and turns it into a potential signifier of pride, while also suggesting the breadth of our country’s multifaceted and complex culture.

**Discussion Questions**

What meaning can you derive from the use of multicolored squares in relation to the overall message of the work? Would your reaction be different if the palette consisted of only black and white? What are some adjectives that could be used to describe the adolescents featured in this work? What is the effect of the grid format?

ENGAGEMENT ACTIVITIES

Research terms such as colored, Negro, black, and African American.
What are the origins of these terms? How have they been used in the past? How are they used now? Discuss how language can be used to perpetuate biases and stereotypes.

Research and discuss the Black Lives Matter movement.
How does Untitled (Colored People Grid) relate to the ideas of this movement? How can art be an effective starting point for these conversations?

Create identity grids.
Have students reflect upon all of the different pieces that contribute to their identities and create grids with one square devoted to each. Grids can be decorated with photographs, drawings, text, etc. Have students share as a group and discuss the complexities that make up individual identity.

Compare and contrast.
Look at both Weems’s Colored People series and Untitled (Colored People Grid). What are the major differences? Does using text have more or less an impact?

VOCABULARY

bias – prejudice in favor of or against one thing, person, or group compared with another, usually in a way considered to be unfair
juxtapose – place close together for contrasting effect
pejorative – expressing contempt or disapproval
stereotype – a widely held but fixed and oversimplified image or idea of a particular type of person or thing

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Untitled (Colored People Grid)
Allison Unruh, “Carrie Mae Weems: Untitled (Colored People Grid),” in Spotlights: Collected by the Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum, by Sabine Eckmann et al. (St. Louis: Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum, 2016), 259–61.

Artist’s Website
carriemaeweems.net/

Artist Interviews
bombmagazine.org/article/3307/
lens.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/09/25/the-genius-of-carrie-mae-weems/?_r=0

Book
Kathryn E. Delmez et al., Carrie Mae Weems: Three Decades of Photography and Video (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012)

Colored People Series

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