

SEEING INTO THE MIRROR:  
THE REALITY OF FICTION IN THE WORK  
OF CARRIE MAE WEEMS

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by  
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THE REALITY OF FICTION IN THE WORK OF CARRIE MAE WEEMS

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and hereby certify that, in their opinion, it is worthy of acceptance.

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## DEDICATION

To my loving family and friends, who have supported me in immeasurable ways over the past two years: I love you, and thanks.

Dad, Mom, John, and Sonoko: I would not have been successful in this adventure if it were not for you, my family. Thank you for always being willing to help me in whatever way possible and for sharing in the excitement and challenge of this experience.

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SEEING INTO THE MIRROR:  
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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines how *Mirror Mirror*, by Carrie Mae Weems, draws attention to and breaks down the prevailing notions of racial difference. In this work Weems juxtaposes a black and white photograph with an alternate version of a line from the story of Snow White. Through the repetition and reappropriation of certain tools of social power the artist exposes their oppressive histories and disrupts their continued power.

Weems acknowledges the way in which photography has been used as an anthropological tool in demonstrating the alleged inferiority of African Americans. The presence of the black woman in *Mirror, Mirror* references the way in which women, and more specifically black women, have served as sites for the male gaze in fine art and visual culture. Through the use of the Snow White fairy tale and its African American adaptation into a folkloric phrase Weems demonstrates the mass familiarity with such stories and the subtle, yet powerful, ways that folklore studies have confirmed the preexisting beliefs about the Other. Finally, in order to show humor's ability to disempower hierarchical structures, Weems' image makes allusions to the distinctive humor patterns such as language play and role reversal used by the literary figure of the Signifying Monkey. The presence of these tools in *Mirror, Mirror* exposes the structures used to confirm Euro-American ways of seeing and interpreting themselves and the world around them.

## INTRODUCTION

Looking into the mirror, the black woman asked, “Mirror, mirror on the wall, who’s the finest of them all?” The mirror says, “Snow White you black bitch, and don’t you forget it!” These words are printed in black text below the photograph, *Mirror, Mirror* (fig. 1)<sup>1</sup>, by Carrie Mae Weems. This piece, made in 1986, is part of the larger *Ain’t Jokin* series. In this group of photographs Weems juxtaposes racist rhymes, riddles, and sayings with her own photographs as well as images that she has appropriated.

*Mirror, Mirror* is a black and white photograph of an African American woman in an austere setting. She stands in front of what appears to be a mirror, and is positioned close to the foreground of the picture plane so that only her upper half is visible. She wears a slip with thin straps that allows us to see her smooth dark brown skin. Her hair is coiffed in a short hairstyle. The woman’s back is turned toward the viewer, but her face is in profile. She holds the mirror, but instead of looking at her reflection, as is common for a woman at her toilette, her eyes are downcast. The woman is looking away from the mirror—avoiding her reflection. There is no reflection of the woman in the mirror. Instead, we see a lighter-skinned woman holding a sparkly astral wand who is reminiscent of the good witch from *The Wizard of Oz* or some other traditional fairy godmother from Western folklore. She is obscured by white gauzy material and her mouth is somewhat open as if she is speaking. To indicate what the woman in the mirror is saying, Weems includes text below the photograph. The viewer is not only a voyeur of a private scene, but also “hears” the conversation between the black woman and the

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<sup>1</sup> Due to copyright restrictions, this image is excluded. Please see: Kircsch, Andrea and Susan Fisher Sterling. *Carrie Mae Weems*, 49.

mirror. This is clearly a fictional composition—one that Weems has intentionally composed—but the issues to which she draws our attention are of the utmost seriousness.

A voyeur watching a woman confront a mirror (although in this case, the woman is partially recoiling after her encounter) immediately calls attention to modes of spectatorship. While Carrie Mae Weems embeds much of her work with content about racial encounters, *Mirror, Mirror* specifically addresses the ways in which modes of spectatorship are shaped by racial assumptions and stereotypes. More specifically, this art work demonstrates how both the ways of seeing and the coinciding stereotypes shape how European American and African Americans see themselves and the world around them.

Recent studies in visual culture<sup>2</sup> focus on the ways in which the culture in which one lives shapes certain ways of seeing.<sup>3</sup> Shared ideologies shape a culture's interpretation of the visual world. *Mirror, Mirror* asks viewers to examine their personal relationship with the social structures and practices which are related to race. In addition to encouraging self-reflection, Weems' work demonstrates the reality that contemporary ways of seeing continue to be influenced by historical representations of blackness and the legacies of slavery, gender oppression, and colonialism. This photograph calls attention to assumptions about beauty, morality, and goodness traditionally linked to these representations. Although not exclusively, Weems links *Mirror, Mirror* to such

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<sup>2</sup> In this context, I am using David Morgan's definition of visual culture. In *The Sacred Gaze: Religious Visual Culture in Theory and Practice* Morgan defines visual culture as "a series of visual practices." Used in this paper, visual culture refers to images in the realms of fine art, advertising, film, pop culture, and material culture.

<sup>3</sup> For one particular example related to American ways of seeing and the role of whiteness, please consult Martin A. Berger's *Sight Unseen: Whiteness and American Visual Culture*.



assumptions concerning the black female body and thus assumes a feminist and postcolonial perspective.

Feminist criticism as practiced by art historians examines the power relationship between images of women and the assumed male viewer as well as the standards for beauty set forth by patriarchal society. Postcolonial criticism questions the way in which formerly colonized people have been further isolated as Other. The combination of the two approaches is used in this work in order to clarify how women of color have been viewed by others. Using examples of visual imagery from Western culture, it can be understood how race has been used as a method of judging the merit of an individual. These particular lenses are appropriate not only based on contemporary art historical practices but also because of the time period in which *Mirror, Mirror* was produced. The 1980s was both the post-Civil Rights and post-second wave feminist era, and the advent of postmodern criticism along with greater social mobility brought the work of such artists as Adrian Piper, Lorna Simpson, Alison Saar, and Carrie Mae Weems into a more public dialogue. Following in a tradition forged by such women of color as Faith Ringgold and Betye Saar, the work of Carrie Mae Weems engages in issues concerned with gender, race, and class. *Mirror, Mirror* is not a criticism of Western patriarchy, but instead implicates all viewers in the perpetuation of viewing the world with “cultural blinders.” Weems calls attention to the subtle, yet powerful ways through which this practice became commonplace.

Weems uses the tools of “colonial” or social power—including the photographic medium, visual culture, folklore, and humor—to expose their mechanisms and operations. More specifically, she uses these devices as tools of resistance against these powerful and

enduring spectatorial practices, thereby participating in a longstanding tradition of African American mimicry, humor, and reappropriation as a means of asserting personal dignity and collective identity. bell hooks describes this process as the way in which Weems “takes us to the abstract complexity within black identity that has been denied, and that has been denied not merely by politics of race but by a politics of culture, and particularly that of vernacular culture in opposition to high culture.”<sup>4</sup> The following chapters of this study will demonstrate how Weems deploys the discourses in her image, how certain groups have oppressed African Americans with these tools, and how the artist transforms them into models of resistance.

In chapter one I will examine Weems’ use of photography’s histories of documentation and representation. The content of her work references how photographs illuminate the cultural structures that form the framework for the interpretive model of looking. The history of African Americans’ struggle for the power of representation is also inseparable from an analysis of *Mirror, Mirror*. Weems’ use of photography indirectly references how the invention of the photographic process in the nineteenth century provided a new model of visual culture for those outside the bourgeois class. Photography continues today to be an easily accessible point of entry for viewers. As a tool of colonial power in the nineteenth century scientists used photography as a scientific method to study, document, and classify the Other. This process, in turn, supported the notion of white supremacy. Weems employs the use of photography as a way to expose these histories. She continues the legacy of African American photographers who document and construct images of the black community. The act of reappropriation is one often shared by African American artists. Weems reappropriates

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<sup>4</sup> bell hooks, *Art on My Mind*, 89.

images, adds textual narrative, and constructs multifaceted compositions that reference other tools of social power in order to acknowledge personal and communal power.

Chapter two addresses visual culture's relation to *Mirror, Mirror* and how Weems' work calls attention to the image of the black female body. Weems' composition acknowledges twentieth-century viewers' comfort levels with images as narrative sequences in order to present a film still-like image. The graphic quality of the text also alludes to narratives as well as advertisements. Weems also uses an archive of images of women of color in photographs, drawings, paintings, and graphics in order to illustrate the way in which visual culture guides the viewer how to interpret, and therefore judge, the world around him or her. Particular kinds of images referenced by *Mirror, Mirror* are images of the Other such as drawings and prints of Saartjie Baartman, the Hottentot Venus; constructed images designed to reinforce "scientific" evidence for the inferiority of minorities; and images of a woman with a mirror and/or at her toilette as reference to vanity and beauty. Weems takes advantage of twentieth century viewer's familiarity with the animated version of Disney's *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, and therefore creates another point of entry for the viewer by transforming a piece of American visual culture. She also interrupts the relationship between viewer and image by turning the clothed black woman's back to the audience—she is not presented as a display object for the consumption of the viewer's gaze.

In chapter three I connect Weems' educational background and interest in folklore to her work in the *Ain't Jokin* series.<sup>5</sup> *Mirror, Mirror* relies on both the Disney animated

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<sup>5</sup> I rely on Dan Ben-Amos' article, "Toward a Definition of Folklore in Context" for a basic definition of folklore. He states that folklore is a body of knowledge, a mode of thought, or a kind of art belonging to a structured group that passes through time via channels of oral transmission. The concept of folklore

version of the Snow White story as well as the Grimm Brothers' version on which it is based. The artist also uses African American folklore as the text to the new narrative created. The appearance of folklore—both Euro and Afro American lore—in the work of Carrie Mae Weems demonstrates the influence of folklore studies on the artist. Much like the producers of visual culture in the nineteenth century, folklorists studied African American folklore and used it as proof of white Western male bourgeois superiority. However, the tale of Snow White tale also exemplifies the ways in which women are taught about social acceptance through beauty and innocence. It demonstrates how society's folklore excludes women of color from this acceptance based on physiognomy. In *Mirror, Mirror* Carrie Mae Weems constructs an alternate version of the Snow White story in order to draw attention to these wider issues.

The final chapter of this study addresses the role of humor in *Mirror, Mirror* and in other works from the *Ain't Jokin* series. Humor is used as a specific mode of resistance in this series and appears specifically in the verbal text below the visual text. The repetition of jokes, rhymes, and sayings in this series reference the folkloric tradition of the Signifying Monkey. The Monkey, in African American narrative poetry, uses word play and linguistic patterns, including humor and insult, to disempower its opponents. Weems creates an uncomfortable situation between the viewer and her work by using racist jokes, rhymes, and sayings each piece of the series. She references the way in which racist humor has been used as a form of domination and forces the viewer to engage in an examination of his/her own racist stereotypes. African Americans have employed racist language as well as images and material culture through reappropriation

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existing only among “the folk” is no longer accepted. Instead, any group structured by geographical location, linguistics, ethnic or occupational similarities can constitute a group with folklore.

as a way to gain power and ownership of such derogatory forms. Weems does just this and further emphasizes her interest in folklore by using jokes as a form of communication in this work.

*Mirror, Mirror* is a staged scene of fiction, but the implications are quite real. Through a close examination of how Carrie Mae Weems uses the tools of colonial power in the work, it can be seen how she breaks open the devices' myths and exposes their inner workings. The photograph is not about blame or victimization, but instead about responsibility and understanding.

## CHAPTER ONE: PHOTOGRAPHY'S EVIDENCE OF "TRUTH"

Much of the meaning in *Mirror, Mirror* relies on the complicated history of photography. This history not only influenced Carrie Mae Weems in her choice of media, but it also illustrates how images are imbued with the cultural beliefs. Photography in particular has a history of serving as visual evidence because of its presumed relationship to the "real." By analyzing images, the societal structures which provide the framework for the interpretive model of seeing become clear. The structures of racism in the United States are evident in *Mirror, Mirror* and Weems connects these structures to those persistent in photographs of African Americans throughout American history, dating back to images of slaves in the nineteenth century.

In a philosophical sense, slavery in the United States was dependent upon myths concerning African difference and inferiority. Early photography is closely linked to these myths because photographs served as visual evidence of racial stereotypes and emphasized physiological difference. Art historian Martin A. Berger claims that it is not coincidental that still photography was invented and popularized in the West at a moment when racial identity was rooted in physiognomy, and the strengths of the new technology in reproducing the material world dovetailed with dominant views of racial identity.<sup>6</sup> Photography was born from the Western desire to understand the surrounding world—whether it was the way silver particles chemically react in solution or the ability to trace evolution by the shape of a human being's skull. No longer were drawings, prints, and paintings the primary source of documentation. Instead, a moment of life, the copy of a likeness, was available to serve as bona fide truth. Additionally, these images circulated

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<sup>6</sup> Martin A. Berger, *Sight Unseen: Whiteness and American Visual Culture*, 128.

widely and were capable of being reproduced infinitely. One of the earliest examples of how photography was employed as a scientific tool is the study of African American slaves by Louis Agassiz. In 1847 Agassiz, a Swiss zoologist, conducted a month-long study of slaves at a plantation in Charleston, South Carolina. His study involved the classification of anatomical differences and led to his claim that the human race did not stem from one origin. Instead he argued there were eight different human “types.” This supported the justification of racial separation and the superiority of whiteness because it “proved” that whites and blacks were not equal on the basic human level and therefore it was morally acceptable to enslave a different human type.

Visual evidence for Agassiz’s study came in the form of daguerreotypes produced by J. T. Zealy in 1850. Zealy photographed both American born slaves as well as those born in Africa. Fifteen of the original daguerreotypes survive, two of which represent Delia in frontal and profile views (fig. 2 and 3).<sup>7</sup> This dual view method of documentation was a common practice in ethnographic photography. In the frontal view, the woman sits in a chair against a blank background. She stares vacantly and directly at the camera with no expression on her face. She is visible from the waist up, and her clothing has been pulled down in order to expose her breasts. Blatant photographic nudity such as this would have been considered obscene in the nineteenth century, but in this circumstance it was neither shocking nor socially awkward. The nakedness of this woman, and the others who were photographed in a similar manner, serves as “scientific” documentation. Because of her “less than human” existence, much like an animal, nakedness was not something about which this woman should be embarrassed. The

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<sup>7</sup> Due to copyright restrictions, these images are excluded. Please see: Willis, Deborah and Carla Williams. *The Black Female Body: A Photographic History*, 22.

unusual nudity and humiliating aspect of her condition is further emphasized by her lack of covering. The display of flesh in these photographs has been described as a “pornography of [the slaves’] forced labor and of their inability to determine whether or how their bodies would be displayed.”<sup>8</sup> The images of these slaves illustrate the way in which the photographic act of representing the Other negated the subject’s identity and power.

The textual labeling of the Zealy photographs is similar to the “labeling” done by Carrie Mae Weems in *Mirror, Mirror*. There are names given with the daguerreotypes of the slaves in addition to their patriarchal lineage, and place of birth/provenance. However, as Deborah Willis and Carla Williams observed, the names are given to identify the slaves as specimens, not to personalize them.<sup>9</sup> This is similar to the text used in *Mirror, Mirror*. The phrase identifies the woman in the photograph as “the black woman.” Her individualism and personal identity have been stripped away—much like the clothing of Delia was stripped away to negate her humanity—so that she can stand in as a “type” for all African American women. Regardless of her personality, intentions, and actions, the woman in Weems’ photograph is still judged based on her physical structure in the same manner of the slaves in Zealy’s photographs.

Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries photography continued to serve as scientific evidence for racially motivated scholarship. While photographs were “born and embraced, at least in part, because of their facility to confirm racial truths that

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<sup>8</sup> Deborah Willis and Carla Williams, *The Black Female Body: A Photographic History*, 23.

<sup>9</sup> Willis and Williams, 22.



Europeans and European-Americans ‘knew,’”<sup>10</sup> nineteenth century viewers only accepted them as “straightforward transcripts of reality” because they conformed to what they already believed.<sup>11</sup> Viewers of J.T. Zealy’s photographs, most likely white academics, engaged with the “truthful” reality of those documents. More importantly, the images that American society accepted as truth revealed mainstream dominant values. Martin A. Berger explains that “Photographs appeared less real when viewers perceived a disjunction between their own beliefs and those apparent in the photographs and more real when they reflected ideologies that accorded with the viewers’ own.”<sup>12</sup>

*Mirror, Mirror* plays on photography’s tension between reality and fiction as decided by the viewer. Although nineteenth century audiences became more aware of how photographs could be mechanically altered, contemporary viewers of Weems’ work have experienced much greater technological advances in the field of visual culture. With the advent of postmodernism viewers of her work are more aware of the concept of the photograph as a construct. Depending on the individual’s own values and beliefs about race and physical appearance, the Weems photograph will have a varying impact. The constructed vignette of the woman, her mirror, and the entity within it, acknowledges its fictional roots. This is further emphasized by the fact that the body of woman “in the mirror” can be seen below the representative frame. Weems has purposely allowed for the viewer to realize that the image is composed of characters, wearing costumes, and posing for the camera. The choice in this particular kind of representation is one that

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<sup>10</sup> Berger, 128.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 43.

<sup>12</sup> Berger, 44.

relates back to African American artists' ability to represent their culture in a manner of their choosing. In the nineteenth century much of the hegemonic textual and visual imagery about African Americans was created by whites who were not impartial observers. W.E.B. Du Bois challenged African Americans to be critical of this practice in his famous questionnaire in the February publication of *The Crisis* in 1926.<sup>13</sup> bell hooks' comment that, "representation is a crucial location of struggle for any exploited and oppressed people asserting subjectivity and decolonization of the mind,"<sup>14</sup> reflects the continuation of this process by people like Carrie Mae Weems all the way into the twenty-first century.<sup>15</sup>

For African Americans in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, photography became a method in which they could have control over their own representation. Because the medium was more accessible to produce and distribute, black photographers were able to use the images to counter popular stereotypes. bell hooks explains:

The camera was the central instrument by which blacks could disprove representations of us created by white folks.... For black folks, the camera provided a means to document a reality that could, if necessary, be packed, stored, moved from place to place. It was documentation that could be shared, passed around. And, ultimately, these images, the worlds they recorded, could be hidden, to be discovered at another time.

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<sup>13</sup> Unfortunately, even though the title of this piece was "The Negro in Art: How Shall He Be Portrayed," none of the responses in the March through November publications focus specifically on visual culture. Instead they are more concerned with literary portrayals.

<sup>14</sup> bell hooks, *Art on My Mind*, 3.

<sup>15</sup> In the Spring-Summer edition of the *Black American Literature Forum* Du Bois' questions were posed again by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. in an effort to "explore readers' feelings about the state of black portraiture in American culture." However, much like the 1926 responses, there are few that mention visual culture.

For many African Americans photographs were personal items to be displayed in the home. While the audience for viewing such images was limited, the images still represent a conscious counteraction against the racist logic of white supremacy. The personally commissioned portrait photographs of African Americans reveal collaboration between photographer and sitter. The dual combination of reality plus constructed view was part of the counter tactics against stereotyping. One such example of this positive self-image is Thomas Easterly's daguerreotype of an unidentified young black woman circa 1860 (fig. 4 and 5).<sup>16</sup> Similar to Zealy's dual views of the slaves, Easterly also produced a frontal and profile view of the woman. The woman wears elaborate clothing and is sitting in a chair with her left arm supported by a side table. She holds a small book, symbolizing her literacy.<sup>17</sup> Like the image of Delia, the woman in Easterly's photograph looks directly at the camera. The woman is represented in a dignified manner because of the setting for the photograph and her clothing. Deborah Willis and Carla Williams explain that, "For the most part... photographs [such as Easterly's] foster self-empowerment, determination, and recover from the haunting legacy of slavery."<sup>18</sup> Compared to the image of Delia, Easterly's young woman is presented in a civilized and respectable manner that demonstrates her own agency within society.

African Americans did not limit their use of photography to the private realm, recognizing that photographs that operated in the public sphere had the potential to reconfigure dominant ways of seeing. W.E.B Du Bois was attuned to the power of

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<sup>16</sup> Due to copyright restrictions, these images are excluded. Please see: Willis, Deborah and Carla Williams. *The Black Female Body: A Photographic History*, 143.

<sup>17</sup> In the profile view the book is open and the woman appears to be looking up from actively reading.

<sup>18</sup> Willis and Williams, 147.

photography to influence cultural perceptions. At the beginning of the twentieth century Du Bois identified himself foremost as a scientist and was committed to the power of “facts” to change racist social structures.<sup>19</sup> For the 1900 Paris Exposition he organized 363 photographs of Southern African Americans as part of his larger Georgia Negro Exhibit. These images were some of the most widely seen examples of how photographs were used in order to reconfigure the racialized structures of the gaze through which race was formulated.<sup>20</sup> There are a total of 134 portraits of men and women in the first sections of both volumes I and II of the archive. Each portrait depicts the sitter in both a frontal and profile view (fig. 6 and 7).<sup>21</sup> Du Bois modeled these portraits on the formal visual codes of scientific photography with their standardized documentation of blank background, consistency in pose, and distance between subject and camera. The images visually recall a long-standing tradition of scientific race photography and can be compared with Zealy’s daguerreotypes of enslaved men and women.

The repetition of visual tropes in the Du Bois photographs invites an analysis of the assumed viewer. In the Zealy anthropological images, the scientific gaze is presumed to be white.<sup>22</sup> Du Bois, having collected photographs for an exposition on the international level, would have been aware that his audience would also be predominantly white. Therefore, his images served a multiracial audience. Despite the power of the photographs to present a different kind of “truth” than those such as the

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<sup>19</sup> Shawn Michelle Smith, *Photography on the Color Line*, 44.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>21</sup> Due to copyright restrictions, this image is excluded. Please see: Smith, Shawn Michelle. *Photography on the Color Line*, 45.

<sup>22</sup> See Shawn Michelle Smith, 49.

Zealy images, it is also important to note that the photographer and the subjects in the images still operate within certain boundaries. For example, the figures in Du Bois' photographs are all dressed in middle class American clothing. Many of the other photographs in the archive depict African Americans in cultured settings with bourgeois items such as musical instruments, books, etc. Similarly, the unidentified woman in Easterly's image also follows the guidelines set forth by American culture for women concerning physical appearance. *The Lady's Almanac for 1854* provides suggestions for ladies who sit for daguerreotypes and begins by proclaiming that "expression is everything."<sup>23</sup> The guidelines stress mental and as well as physical preparation in addition to being selective about the Artist one chooses to sit for. Jewelry, lace, the neckline of a dress, the contours of the hands, and cheekbones are all aspects to be considered and scrutinized when posing. Hair style and texture is also important. According to the article, "The hair may be smooth or lay evenly, but should never be sleeked or matted down... It should be arranged in curves, waves or curls, avoiding angles and horn-shaped protuberances."<sup>24</sup> The author of these suggestions was Albert S. Southworth, a daguerreotypist. In his image of Harriet Beecher Stowe, circa 1843 (fig. 8),<sup>25</sup> the Victorian visual conventions for portraits are apparent. Stowe is seated against a blank background next to a table draped with fabric. She is wearing a satiny dress with a cameo at the base of the neckline, much like the woman in Easterly's image. The edge of the chair can be seen on Stowe's left and the plant pot on the table is adorned with

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<sup>23</sup> Albert S. Southworth, "Suggestions for Ladies Who Sit for Daguerreotypes," in *The Lady's Almanac for 1854*, 102.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Due to copyright restrictions, this image is excluded. Please see: The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art. "Selected Works from the Collection." [http://www.nelson-atkins.org/art/CollectionDatabase\\_DeptView.cfm?col=photo](http://www.nelson-atkins.org/art/CollectionDatabase_DeptView.cfm?col=photo).

classical ornament. This image displays the tropes of bourgeois portraiture for the nineteenth century that were also used by Du Bois in his images for the Georgia Negroes Exhibit. In both Du Bois' images and those such as Easterly's young woman, the choice of fashion and props betray the standards of taste which continued to define the Other.<sup>26</sup> Despite the power of agency over representation through the photography, these images work within certain boundaries in order to signify their resistance.

Although Weems' *Mirror, Mirror* is not a typical portrait, it illustrates the history of African Americans' struggle for both a positive way for self-representation as well as history of photography as a tool of racist logic—establishing a certain typology. It calls attention to the dual function of the photographic portrait: self-presentation versus the generalized look. Photographer and critic Allan Sekula explains it as a double system: “a system of representation capable of functioning both *honorifically* and *repressively*.”<sup>27</sup> The black woman is anonymous yet a signifier for an entire race at the same time. The ability of Carrie Mae Weems to construct her own images, and the choice of the women in the image to be photographed honors the legacy of black women with no agency, such as Delia. Conversely, *Mirror, Mirror*'s reminder of the way in which physical appearance is viewed through a particular dominant Western lens demonstrates the continuation of the “dual system” that began in the nineteenth century.

One of the ways in which Carrie Mae Weems transforms the oppressive nature of photography is by continuing the tradition of African American photographers who assume the power to document and construct images of a group to which they belong.

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<sup>26</sup> Allan Sekula writes about the presentation of a bourgeois self and the new hierarchy of taste in his essay, “The Body and the Archive.”

<sup>27</sup> Allan Sekula, “The Body and the Archive,” 6.

Her early work was strictly documentary, and this stems not only from her interest in photography, but also her social concerns. Prior to studying art in academia she held employment in several blue collar jobs and engaged in social and political activism. Weems early photographs were of the areas of the United States to which she was connected: her hometown Portland, Oregon; New York; and California. One of her first major series, *Family Pictures and Stories*, is comprised of photographs of her family coupled with narrative text. This series did not gloss over unflattering aspects of her family, and demonstrates her role as a photographer was not necessarily to depict herself and family in a strictly positive manner, but instead, it was to exercise her power as an artist to represent a group to which she belongs.

The *Family Pictures and Stories* series is noticeably similar to the Roy De Carava and Langston Hughes project *The Sweet Flypaper of Life* published 1955. De Carava's photographs are juxtaposed with Hughes' written narrative to create a "portrait" of Harlem in the 1950s. These images and text, although created through the artistic processes of two men, reveal a realistic presentation of people and places by those who actually experienced them. This was a similar goal for Weems, and although highly personal, the *Family Pictures and Stories* series also spoke to those who shared experiences in the black community. Weems' following work would move away from more personal images to those with more socially conscious content. While she continued to use a black and white format similar to the documentary style photography of the earlier twentieth century, Weems also began to use a large format camera with square

negatives. Art historian Andrea Kirsch explains that this shift reflects how Weems responded to highly posed imagery of the commercial world and popular culture.<sup>28</sup>

It was Weems' photography professor at the University of California, San Diego who helped her to develop questions about documentary photography that also became topics of general interest to the art world in the 1980s: who makes the images and who is the intended audience? Questions such as these are concerned with the production and circulation of images in addition to their intended function and how they betray the values of the culture that produced them. Weems' *From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried* piece from 1995 is an example of how she has engaged with such questions. By reappropriating photographs taken from the nineteenth century and transforming them into new artistic pieces, this series of work acknowledges the ways that people studying anthropology and ethnography have used photography as a scientific tool to classify, document, study, and "master" the Other. For example, in *An Anthropological Debate* and *& A Photographic Subject* (fig. 9 and 10),<sup>29</sup> Weems enlarged reproductions of J. T. Zealy's slave images. An older black man's frontal image is on the left and on his left, in a separate frame, is a black woman. Both individuals are naked from the waist up. Original black and white daguerreotypes were small in size and had to be viewed from a short distance. This created an intimate, personal viewing experience. Instead of reproducing the size of the daguerreotypes to imitate that experience, Weems enlarged them, tinted them with red and reframed them both physically and symbolically. Through the enlargement process the artist has further emphasized the unnatural character of the

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<sup>28</sup> Andrea Kirsch, *Carrie Mae Weems*, 13.

<sup>29</sup> Due to copyright restrictions, this image is excluded. Please see: Patterson, Vivian. *Carrie Mae Weems: The Hampton Project*, 26.



original daguerreotypes. Instead of the original images being treasured portraits meant for intimate eyes, they were met by the cold, hard stare of the laboratory.<sup>30</sup> Now viewed in the gallery space, they are met by a different kind of stare. By not including the original names of the slaves, which were used for scientific identification, Weems calls attention to their anonymity. Weems adds her own text, all capital letters imposed—almost as brands—across the photographs that poignantly addresses the role the individuals served as well as the role of the original photographs. Through this dramatic transformation, the images function to critique the damaging legacy of their originals.

Not only does Weems acknowledge the power of photography for and against blacks, but she uses these photographs in such a way as to reclaim the power of those that work against African Americans. She participates in the process of reclamation with many other twentieth century African American artists. For example, Murray De Pillars, Michael Ray Charles, and Kara Walker all deal with stereotypical images of African Americans from visual and material culture, while Weems deals mostly with photography and the visual arts. Several works from the *Ain't Jokin* series demonstrate her ability to bring together and transform images, sayings, and jokes that have all previously worked against blacks. It is Weems' intention that because of this new context, the viewer will engage in a thoughtful and self-examining response to these elements. One such example of how Weems uses racist tools against themselves is in *A Child's Verse (In 1944 my father went to war)* (fig. 11).<sup>31</sup> The work is a reproduced black and white photograph of a group of white men standing together in a group outside. The men are wearing ties and

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<sup>30</sup> Shawn Michelle Smith, *Photography on the Color Line*, 47.

<sup>31</sup> Due to copyright restrictions this image is excluded. Please see: Kircsch, Andrea and Susan Fisher Sterling. *Carrie Mae Weems*, 51.

suit jackets, and the central man is holding a wooden stick and appears to be demonstrating how to swing it. Below the photograph is black text that reads: “In 1944 my father went to war. Pulled a trigger, shot a nigger, that was the end of the war. A *child’s verse*” Carrie Mae Weems is not responsible for the creation of either the photograph or the verse, but she juxtaposed the two in order to demonstrate the power of such imagery and seemingly meaningless sayings for children. By completely removing herself from the equation, Weems draws attention to the reality that the work is a product of American culture. By reclaiming these sayings and images and placing them in new contexts, Weems uses photography to undermine the damage it has done to African Americans since its invention/discovery.

In conjunction with the power of her photographs Weems employs the use of text. The text serves to guide the viewer towards a specific interpretation of the image. Reading and looking at the art work causes the viewer to engage with the work for a longer amount of time and adds another layer of meaning. The use of text with photography also mirrors the way images circulate in magazines, newspapers, and advertising,<sup>32</sup> and therefore speaks to twentieth century viewers who are accustomed to the media’s use of imagery and language. Weems’ particular use of text with photographs in *Mirror, Mirror* is reminiscent of the kind of text used to identify the subjects in early scientific daguerreotype. The text associated with Delia’s photograph is minimal and provides just enough information to reaffirm to the viewer that Delia is simply a type. The text in *Mirror, Mirror* similarly identifies the “black woman” as a type. However,

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<sup>32</sup> Kellie Jones, “In Their Own Image,” in *Artforum*, 133.

Weems appropriates text or constructs her own to lead the viewer to a much more powerful interpretation of the work.

In many of the other pieces from the *Ain't Jokin* series Weems constructs her own photographs as a way to create images of African Americans that would be able to “rise above the depiction of blacks always as the victim of the gaze.”<sup>33</sup> *Mirror, Mirror* references the ways in which individuals such as Agassiz used photography as a way to shape racial ideology. Although the black woman in *Mirror, Mirror* operates within a fictional setting, Weems’ image differs from anthropological images. The relationship between Weems and her subject is that they are both women of color, as opposed to the relationship of difference between Zealy and the slaves. She continues the tradition of African American photographers who placed their subjects in constructed environments, but gives the black woman agency. The figure is given a history (past, present, and future) through the inclusion of narrative text, she is clothed, and is able to question her identity. Furthermore, the black woman has the power to create her own identity by rejecting the comment of the mirror. This is a power that Agassiz and history did not grant to such individuals as Delia. Through this multiple layering, Weems illuminates the history of certain cultural ways of seeing. More importantly, Weems reframes our vision against the operational logic of racism.

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<sup>33</sup> Quoted in Lisa Gail Collins, *The Art of History*, 30.

## CHAPTER TWO: VISUAL CULTURE AND THE BLACK FEMALE BODY

Photography is just one of the means used by Carrie Mae Weems to expose the ways in which certain tools of power have been used in racist ways. All photographs are part of a larger realm of visual culture to which *Mirror, Mirror* and other images belong. The study of visual culture examines the ways that all images express and impress meaning upon the culture in which they operate. The dialogue between images always goes back and forth. There are particular kinds of visual texts from American culture that are referenced in *Mirror, Mirror*. Their legacies are impressed upon its discursive context, and reveal their impact on larger cultural ways of seeing.

In the most basic sense Weems uses the viewer's familiarity and comfort level with images as a narrative sequence in order to tell her own "moralized story." She works with a visual medium in her artwork, and therefore knows the power that images can have. The graphic quality of image plus text alludes to storybook narratives as well as advertisements. There is an immediate association between the image and the text—they go together and the text guides the interpretation of the image.

In *Mirror, Mirror* Weems uses the popular story of Snow White and relies on the assumption that the viewer is familiar with the basic narrative. Most Western viewers instantly recognize the tableaux of a woman standing in front of a mirror. The phrase, "Mirror, mirror on the wall... who's the fairest (or finest) of them all?" is known to belong specifically to the story of Snow White. The story, or rather, this phrase is the basis for the composition of Weems' work. Familiarity with the characters and plot of the Snow White tale is important for a greater understanding of the work because of the

associations made between characters: who approaches the mirror, who does not, and who is granted the title of “fairest.”

The most important way that Weems uses the field of visual culture in this work is the way in which she makes connections between the black woman in *Mirror, Mirror* and the archive of images of black women in Western history. It has been these drawings, paintings, and photographs that have affected Weems personally. *Mirror, Mirror* is staged imagery, but it nevertheless represents the real. It calls to our attention the legacy of images of both white and black women that expresses the notion that physical characteristics of white women are desirable, and women of color are not. These images reveal the shared ideologies about women of color—their beauty, morality, sexuality, and personality—as expressed by the producers of the images. It is because of these images that American cultural ways of seeing race and beauty developed and continue to exist.

The visually represented comparison between races for the specific purpose of identifying the Other developed during the age of Western Imperialism. In the nineteenth century the United States, along with England and France engaged in a rapid colonial/imperial expansion into Africa, Asia, the Caribbean, and South America. “These aggressions and the drive to dominate the indigenous populations subsequently fostered the births of anthropology and ethnology and the study of the natural sciences, including physiognomy and phrenology, all of which existed only through the element of comparison to an ‘Other,’ which the colonies provided.”<sup>34</sup>

One of the earliest examples of how this comparison transferred into visual culture was in Saartjie Baartman. Baartman, a young Khoi or San woman from southern Africa, was displayed in Europe from 1810- 1815. The focus of attention was directed at

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<sup>34</sup> Carla Williams, “Naked Neutered, or Noble,” in *Skin Deep, Spirit Strong*, 185.

her physical differences that contrasted from those of the corporal characteristics of white European women. Her own body was used as “a visual personification of myth: the myth of African difference and inferiority.”<sup>35</sup>

The existing images of Saartjie Baartman illustrate the necessity of visual evidence in the production and continuation of myth. Baartman’s body served as evidence for scientific conclusions about the Other, as do the watercolor images of her by an unknown artist (fig. 12 and 13).<sup>36</sup> These two images follow the dual view system that was common in scientific illustration. Baartman is depicted in the nude, and there is no background around her save some indication of a ground below her. Baartman stares directly in front of her, much like the Zealy photographs of Delia. Unlike the Agassiz photographs of slaves, it is possible that Baartman posed for these images voluntarily. Of this decision, however, we will never be sure. What is missing from an analysis of Baartman’s life and experiences as the Other is her own voice.

Baartman was advertised as the “Hottentot Venus.” The juxtaposition of the words “Hottentot”<sup>37</sup> and “Venus” can be interpreted to mean that Baartman was the antithesis of European beauty and sexual mores, which were embodied in the Roman goddess, Venus. Her blackness and different body proportions were emphasized along with a mythologically perceived primitive sexual nature. Although she was considered to be opposite of what Europeans thought of as beautiful, viewers fetishized her body and her alleged sexuality. There is an allegorical relationship between Western imperialism

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<sup>35</sup> Lisa Gail Collins, *The Art of History*, 12.

<sup>36</sup> Due to copyright restrictions, this image is excluded. Please see: Willis, Deborah and Carla Williams. *The Black Female Body: A Photographic History*, 62.

<sup>37</sup> The term “Hottentot” is now considered to be an offensive term in South African English dictionaries.

and the conquest of places such as Africa, and black sexuality. The relationship between colonizer and colonized subject is similar to the potential relationships between white European men and the sexualized, nude black female body. These relationships were about power, domination, and ownership in the same way that imperialists treated the areas they colonized.

During the nineteenth century in the United States the sexual nature of blacks continued to be considered primitive and unbridled by whites. Because of their role as slaves, black women were viewed as sexual property for the slave owner. Disallowing these women to be part of the Victorian notions of womanhood demarcated them to a non-woman status and therefore justified their sexual exploitation as well as their slavery. Instead of the attraction/repulsion phenomenon that was more openly acknowledged in Europe, black women—through the viewing of their bodies—were dissected from their humanity. Carla Williams supports this conclusion when she writes, “Black women [in the United States] have been depicted either naked, generally in an ethnographic context, or as laborers, usually domestic, their social status playing a crucial role in the development of visual identity.”<sup>38</sup> The daguerreotypes of Delia (fig. 2 and 3) operate in the same manner as the watercolor paintings of Saartjie Baartman. Both are pieces of visual culture from the nineteenth century that work to solidify the preexisting stereotypes about people of color.

“Evidence” of black inferiority existed in other areas of visual culture throughout American history. While Carrie Mae Weems focuses particularly on the historical representation and reception of the black female body in *Mirror, Mirror* there are other stereotypical images of African Americans that have weighed in on the formation of

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<sup>38</sup> Carla Williams, “Naked, Neutered, or Noble,” in *Skin Deep, Spirit Strong*, 182.

racist ideology. The collection, and therefore the operation, of these images relates to that which African American artists have worked against in their counteractions of representation.

Created characters such as Black Sambo, Aunt Jemima, and Uncle Mose have mostly played the role of stereotypical blacks in advertisements. The creation of their physical characteristics was intrinsically related to the role in which they served as promoter of certain products. More importantly, these fictional characters symbolically kept African Americans in such roles as the happy infidel, asexual mammy, and noble savage. Although not specifically referenced in *Mirror, Mirror* there are works by Carrie Mae Weems in the *American Icons* series from 1988–89 that make poignant statements about these derogatory characters embodied by pieces of material culture.

The photographs in the *American Icons* series are close views of places in the home such as a desktop, kitchen counter, and living room end table. *Untitled (Salt and pepper shakers)* (fig. 14)<sup>39</sup> shows a kitchen wall and countertop with several cooking utensils framing the edges. Under a hanging wire whisk stands a pair of salt and pepper shakers in the form of two people. The left figure is a black man wearing a white chef's uniform and holding a wooden spoon close to his body. The woman on the right wears a dress that covers her entire body and a head wrap tied in a knot on the top of her head. These figures represent two of the labor roles blacks served in both during and after slavery. The woman is the typical mammy character who took care of the white children, kept house, and even served as a wet nurse for some white families. Her own femininity and sexuality are eliminated through the heavy clothing and covering of her hair. The

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<sup>39</sup> Due to copyright restrictions, this image is excluded. Please see: Kircsch, Andrea and Susan Fisher Sterling. *Carrie Mae Weems*, 54.



man is similar to the Rastus character who appeared on Cream of Wheat boxes as a simple, yet happy cook. Weems' photograph plays upon the fiction versus reality tension that has been discussed before. She composed a scene to photograph—picked out the items, arranged them, and chose her composition. While the small figurines do not actually work, their presence is a reminder about the legacy of slavery. Making salt and pepper shakers in the form of African American workers seals their identities into an anonymous slaves who sit quietly until needed.

The proliferation of material and visual cultural items that depicted African Americans in a derogatory manner has been the most common and effective way of solidifying whites' perceptions of blacks. Concerning African American women, there was a focus on their ugliness and “unwomanly” qualities that assisted in the promotion of white beauty standards. For example, the die-cut lithographed paper figure from an unknown date (fig. 15)<sup>40</sup> depicts a mammy-like figure with the head of an older man. The figure's head is bald on top, but the side of its hair is black and long with white streaks.<sup>41</sup> The figure has an exaggerated nose and mouth, and appears to have little to no neck. It is unclear whether this is supposed to be a male or female, but it is abundantly clear that the ambiguity of this image is intentional. It is a firm statement that African American women are ugly and unfeminine. Whatever the actual practical purpose this paper die-cut served is secondary to the present discussion. It is more important to understand how Carrie Mae Weems acknowledges the oppressive way in which this image, and all those like it, works to promote a racist ideology.

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<sup>40</sup> Due to copyright restrictions, this image is excluded. Please see: Congdon-Martin, Douglas. *Images in Black: 150 Years of Black Collectibles*, 109.

<sup>41</sup> Strangely enough, this figure's hair “style” is similar to an older Frederick Douglas's hair.

*Mirror, Mirror* also refers to a larger body of images of women—black and white—as they have appeared in Western art. The amount of images in fine art can be further narrowed down to specific images of a woman at her toilette. Images such as these, for the purpose of this discussion, are images of women who regard themselves in mirrors.<sup>42</sup> Often, paintings such as these were used as a moral message warning against the sins of pride and vanity. Much in the way that Narcissus sealed his own fate by looking at his reflection, images of women with mirrors stood as allusions to inevitable death with the hope that viewers would choose to live with less superficial concerns. Essentially, vanitas images established a standard of “good” and “bad.” Those who spend time focusing on their physiognomy instead of the state of their soul are inherently wrong or bad. Weems’ decision to depict a black woman in front of a mirror references these judgmental standards. *Mirror, Mirror* calls attention to the operational logic behind the black female body serving as the antithesis to that of the white female.

Other images of women and mirrors have served to reinforce the constructed social roles of women. So much of a woman’s identity is concerned with how she appears to others. “[The act of checking one’s appearance in the mirror] addresses the issues of self-conception and the recovery of information about how other people have conceived of her.”<sup>43</sup> Mary Cassatt’s 1909 painting, *Antoinette at her Dresser* (fig. 16),<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> It is relevant to mention that there are many Western paintings of the goddess Venus at her mirror. One example, Rubens’ *Venus at a Mirror* from 1615, depicts the goddess as a blond woman whose nude back is facing the viewer. This image is also particularly interesting because there is a black woman visible in the upper right side of the painting. Both she, and the winged boy who holds the mirror for the goddess look upon Venus. Not only do the paintings of Venus looking at herself accentuate her beauty, but Rubens’ addition of a black woman provides a strong contrast between the two women.

<sup>43</sup> Jenijoy La Belle, *Herself Beheld: The Literature of the Looking Glass*, 15. Many thanks to C. Wilcox-Titus for this source.

is an example of how socially acceptable it is for a woman to sit in front of a mirror and stare at her reflection. In this painting, a woman is sitting in front of her vanity mirror and uses a hand mirror to check her reflection. Her body language also indicates that she is meditating on her own image as if pondering her own identity in the mirror. The woman is also positioned so that she is simultaneously looking at herself while being looked at by the viewer. She must make sure her appearance is acceptable and meets her own standards that have been established by those of society. It is appropriate and important for the woman to check her hair, make-up, etc. in the mirror because it is important for her to meet Western qualifications of beauty that dictate her identity as a woman.

American artist Norman Rockwell's cover for the March 1954 edition of the *Saturday Evening Post* shows how the mirror and criterion for beauty traverse race and age in American society. *Girl at Mirror* (fig. 17)<sup>45</sup> depicts a young girl seated in front of a large mirror with a frame similar to the one in the Weems image. She has cast aside her doll, and beside her feet sit her new playthings—cosmetics. A magazine depicting a beautiful white woman with lush dark hair lays open in the girl's lap. The young girl stares at herself in the mirror as if she is wondering if she will ever be that beautiful. She is hoping to measure up to what the media shows her is the ideal, or "fairest." This image, as well as the Cassatt painting, demonstrates how society's ideal is unobtainable not only by the Other, but also by those who in are assumed to already fit into the category. Any woman who searches for her acceptance through the mirror falls prey to the fiction of the ideal.

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<sup>44</sup> Due to copyright restrictions, this image is excluded. Please see: Kelsche, Anne. "How Women are Depicted in Art," University of North Dakota. <http://www.und.edu/instruct/akelsch/paint.htm>.

<sup>45</sup> Due to copyright restrictions, this image is excluded. Please see: The Artchive. [http://www.artchive.com/artchive/R/rockwell/rockwell\\_mirror.jpg.html](http://www.artchive.com/artchive/R/rockwell/rockwell_mirror.jpg.html).

Although *Mirror, Mirror* calls attention to the larger body of imagery of women and mirrors, it is important to note that women of color have not often filled the role of “woman at her toilette.” In Western art, as previously mentioned black women have often served a secondary role as anonymous, silent bystander, as in Edouard Manet’s 1863 painting, *Olympia*. Otherwise, as in the case of Saartjie Baartman, the black female body existed as the site of the attraction/repulsion fetish that developed from the notions of primitive and unbridled sexuality mixed with an erotic interest in the physiognomy of the Other. Carrie Mae Weems’ 2003 self-portrait, *I Looked and Looked and Failed to See What So Terrified You* (fig. 18)<sup>46</sup> reverses this trend while still calling attention to it. In this photograph, Weems is placed against a blank background. She is wearing an outfit similar to the traditional African “up and down” that appears to be made out of a quilt. Weems is holding a mirror, gazing into it, and lightly touching the side of her face. Unlike the woman in *Mirror, Mirror* who looks away from the glass, Weems presents herself as fully capable of actively looking at herself like the woman in Cassatt’s painting. She stands tall, looks upward, and presents herself as a confident woman. Her choice of clothing and fabric, as well as the subject matter pay homage to her membership in a community of African American women and artists. It is both the subject matter of this photograph and its circulation through museums as part of the installation, the Louisiana Project, that disrupt traditional roles and views for women of color in the Western art canon.

Much like the accompanying text in much of her work, the title of Weems’ self-portrait plays an integral part of the meaning of the work. Her choice of language,

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<sup>46</sup> Due to copyright restrictions, this image is excluded. Please see: University of California Berkeley. “Carrie Mae Weems, Art Practice.” [http://www.berkeley.edu/news/berkeleyan/2005/03/02\\_lectures.shtml](http://www.berkeley.edu/news/berkeleyan/2005/03/02_lectures.shtml).

“looked and looked,” emphasizes a continual action. Weems indicates that she has looked in the mirror in the past multiple times and chooses to depict herself actively looking—searching to find that which has been so destructive to the cultural ways of seeing black women. The power Weems has granted herself is not repeated in *Mirror, Mirror*. Once again, it is the text—the choice of language—that reveals the black woman’s lack of power. The text reads that the woman *looked* into the mirror, and *asked*, but the mirror *says* its response. This use of the present tense indicates that the answer to the black woman’s question is on-going.

The continual answer of the mirror, and the continual visit to the mirror by all women is indicative that the formation of the self is not a one-time, monumental event as suggested by Lacan. Jenijoy La Belle argued against the Lacanian “mirror stage” with her claims that a woman’s encounter with the mirror is constituted in many instances over a lifetime and not in a single moment.<sup>47</sup> Specifically, it is a “continual, ever shifting process of self-realization.”<sup>48</sup> Habitual self-examination in a mirror marks the fact that one must use the mirror as a tool to gauge how one is doing in the process. This indicates that there exists an ideal by which to measure oneself. In *Mirror, Mirror* the ideal is manifested in the character of Snow White. Because Snow White is the finest, she represents the standard of beauty to which all others are compared.

Continual comparison to the ideal results in actions to copy the ideal and make oneself resemble the “finest.” The process of African American women negotiating their way in the dominant structure of beautification is related to Homi Bhabha’s use of

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<sup>47</sup> Jenijoy La Belle, *Herself Beheld: The Literature of the Looking Glass*, 10.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

“mimicry”—difference that is almost the same, but not quite. La Belle’s description is as such: “the woman’s physiognomy is but a shadow version of the perfect face of beauty.”<sup>49</sup> In the way that African American women have engaged in lightening their skin to look more white, or using different hair solutions in order to have smooth, straight hair, Bhabha describes this as “a complex strategy of reform, regulations, and discipline, which ‘appropriates’ the Other as it visualizes power.”<sup>50</sup> Much like La Belle’s feminist version of the “mirror stage,” Bhabha’s strategy involves a continual process of effort and reevaluation. The Other, in this case, is the ideal. Much like a mirror reverses the reflection, the Other represents that which is strived for, or the ideal that is sought after. In relation to the *Mirror, Mirror* piece, the Other is Snow White.

The copying of the ideal or the striving to mimic its standards becomes evidence that holds people back from their own self-realization. Bhabha explains that “the visibility of mimicry is always produced at the site of interdiction.”<sup>51</sup> This phenomenon is not limited to one specific group of women, but as applied to *Mirror, Mirror* it is at the very moment that the black woman attempts to gain mobility/acceptance that she is struck down by the *almost the same but not white* factor. Because of the sparseness of her clothing and the fictionally created scene, it is difficult to place the woman in a particular time frame, socioeconomic class, or location. It is her hair that alludes to the purposeful physiognomic effort made in front of a mirror.

Mimicry is represented by the style of the black woman’s hair. It can be assumed that Carrie Mae Weems made a conscious decision to have the woman’s hair coiffed in a

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<sup>49</sup> La Belle, 17.

<sup>50</sup> Homi Bhabha, “Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse,” 126.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 130.

particular hairstyle. The woman's hair is smooth on top and curled in large sections. It makes reference to the extreme importance of hair care and hair styling in both African and African American cultures. Particularly in America, black hair texture has been what Deborah R. Grayson refers to as "the antithesis of attributes of (white) feminine beauty."<sup>52</sup> While African American hair styling practices can be seen as a reflection of indigenous African hairstyling traditions, they can also be interpreted as a way of fitting into mainstream societal norms about "manageable" hair. "Naturally" maintained hair has been considered unmanageable and one of the points of demarcation between black and white women. Therefore in the United States hair quality has been further emphasized in the sense that, in the antebellum South, unmanageable hair could symbolize a slave that had to be managed. Cultural critic bell hooks writes about the importance of hair within a twentieth century black familial community:

Good hair is hair that is not kinky, hair that does not feel like balls of steel wool, hair that does not take hours to comb, hair that does not need tons of grease to untangle, hair that is long. Real good hair is straight hair, hair like white folks' hair. Yet no one says so. Now one says your hair is so nice, so beautiful because it is like white folks' hair. We pretend that the standards we measure our beauty by are our own invention—that it is questions of time and money that lead us to make distinctions between good hair and bad hair.<sup>53</sup>

In this passage, hooks admits that mimicry is a reality. In this narrative she goes on to write that the group ritual of hair straightening is a rite of passage and a bonding experience for girls approaching womanhood. Although there is an acknowledgement of the relation of the hair straightening process to white people's hair, this is not an

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<sup>52</sup> Deborah R. Grayson, "Is it Fake?: Black Women's Hair as Spectacle and Spec(tac)ular," in *Camera Obscura*, 14.

<sup>53</sup> bell hooks, From "Black is a Woman's Color," 382.

expression of the desire to become white.<sup>54</sup> It is about the desire to be beautiful, and for many women—black and white, beauty is measured by American society’s dominant standards.

The 1960s and 1970s brought about a change in African American attitudes regarding facial features and hair in the United States. The “Black is Beautiful” movement encouraged African Americans to embrace their own unique features and disregard the mainstream images of beauty standards. Toni Morrison exclaimed that, “The assertion of racial beauty was not a reaction to the self-mocking, humorous critique of cultural/racial foibles common in all groups, but against the damaging internalization of assumptions of immutable inferiority originating in an outside gaze.”<sup>55</sup> Morrison recognizes the power of ideologies that are based solely on corporeal observation. Reactions in the 1960s to centuries of this practice resulted in the presentation and celebration of African American physical traits. In photography, this phenomenon is illustrated in Patrick Lichfield’s 1969 photograph of Marsha Hunt in which a large, fluffy “Afro” hairstyle is celebrated (fig. 19).<sup>56</sup> Much like many of the images of blacks discussed earlier, Hunt is presented alone against a blank background. Although nude, she is positioned in such a way that only her bare arms and legs are visible. Hunt’s image is dissimilar to those of Saartjie Baartman because it is neither used for scientific documentation nor exploitation of the Other. Instead, this photograph celebrates Hunt’s

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Toni Morrison, afterword to *The Bluest Eye*, 210.

<sup>56</sup> Due to copyright restrictions, this image is excluded. Please see: The Whitechapel Art Gallery, London. “Back to Black.” [http://www.whitechapel.org/content.php?page\\_id=1255](http://www.whitechapel.org/content.php?page_id=1255).



role in the musical, *Hair*. Hunt's Afro does not mimic white Western standards of beauty, but instead is a symbol for the counterculture of the hippies and anti-war activists.

The woman in Weems' photograph is too far removed from this time of revolution. She paid attention to the dominant white culture's requirements for hair, but it makes no difference. The mirror continues to say that it is the white woman, Snow White, whose beauty reigns supreme. Angela M. Neal, who has studied the role of skin color and physical features in the black community, writes about the relationship between self-perception and physiognomy. She explains, "Unfortunately, though, it turned out not to be that easy for most to erase years of deeply ingrained beliefs and feelings associated with the white standard of goodness and attractiveness."<sup>57</sup> This is certainly the case with the woman in the *Mirror, Mirror* image. In spite of successful efforts made by people such as W.E.B. Du Bois the powerful and lasting effects of racism linger.

Carrie Mae Weems uses her art work against the persistence of racist ideologies—particularly those which circumscribe negative representations of African Americans. In *Mirror, Mirror* the archive of oppressive images within American visual culture are present and absent at the same time. The haunting legacies of Saartjie Baartman and Aunt Jemima affect the continual process of self-realization for the black woman in front of the mirror. Yet the visual presence of these legacies is missing. Weems does not use the nude female body in this work and by cropping most of the black woman's body out of the frame, she does not allow the woman's body to be the site of intense observation.

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<sup>57</sup> Angela M. Neal, "The Role of Skin Color and Features in the Black Community: Implications for Black Women and Therapy," 327.

Through the transformation of the Snow White story, Weems employs the multifaceted African American concept of signifying.<sup>58</sup> Du Bois' Georgia Negro images "signify on" the visual codes of scientific photography by repeating visual practices,<sup>59</sup> and Weems continues this practice by repeating the scenario of the Snow White tale, yet transforming it in order to invert its original function and message. Instead of the wicked queen posing the question to a magic mirror, it is a black woman posing the question. *Mirror, Mirror* also reconstructs the image of a woman at her toilette. By inserting a black woman into the main role, Weems subverts the traditional Western tableaux of white woman as the subject of such a scene. By calling on the vast history of visual culture Weems makes connections to those images which have served as sites of sexualized and racialized gazes. Their recognition in *Mirror, Mirror* demonstrates how Weems actively works against their power.

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<sup>58</sup> Cherise Smith, "Fragmented Documents," 254. Smith explains that signifying can involve the use of references and borrowings from earlier sources. Weems uses photographs, folktales, myths and songs.

<sup>59</sup> Shawn Michelle Smith, 46.

### CHAPTER THREE: THE STUDY OF FOLKLORE IN THE FORMATION OF THE OTHER

Phrases, stories, and sayings from African American folklore often serve as the text for Carrie Mae Weems' photographs. Weems is also aware of the vernacular language and speech patterns that are used in folk traditions and often incorporates them into the corresponding texts. After working with her own family for the series *Family Pictures and Stories* Weems decided to pursue her interest in storytelling and folklore at the University of California, Berkeley. She entered the master's program there in 1984, and at first saw the study of folklore as independent of her work as a photographer.<sup>60</sup> Weems was inspired to consider photography as folklore after reading the work of Alan Dundes. His scholarship expanded folklore from the study of verbal traditions to include visual material.<sup>61</sup> Not only does Weems draw upon folkloric traditions for her work, but then her work becomes part of the lexicon of African American folklore.

*Mirror, Mirror* uses two different kinds of folklore that are visually and textually represented. The story of Snow White is both implied and depicted, and the text below the photograph is part of African American folk traditions. Both have been changed from their original form of presentation. In Weems' work the visual representation of Snow White references the familiar folktale. The story of Snow White is based on the first published version of Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm's 1812 collection of fairy-tales, *Kinder- und Hausmärchen*. In this version, Snow White's stepmother owns the magic mirror. Before Snow White becomes a pre-adolescent the queen is reassured that she is the fairest.

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<sup>60</sup> Andrea Kirsch, "Carrie Mae Weems: Issues in Black, White, and Color," 13.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*

Once the mirror informs the queen that Snow White is a thousand times more fair, the queen becomes enraged. She orders the huntsman to kill Snow White and mutilate her body; he is to bring her Snow White's lungs and liver as proof of her death. However, because of Snow White's innocence, she is spared. She finds friendship and protection (although clearly inadequate) with the dwarfs in the forest. After learning, from the mirror, that Snow White is indeed still the fairest, the queen makes three more attempts to kill her. Using the disguise of an old haggardly woman, she tricks Snow White into a suffocating corset, wearing a poison hair comb, and finally eating a poison apple. The dwarfs place Snow White in a glass coffin in the forest. Ironically her body does not decompose, but instead she remains "as white as snow, as red as blood, with hair as black as ebony."<sup>62</sup> Upon seeing Snow White's body, a prince asks the dwarfs for her coffin. When the coffin is being carried it is jostled enough for the bit of poison apple to dislodge and Snow White awakes. She and the prince are soon engaged, and the queen discovers that, once again, she is not the fairest. The story ends with the wicked queen being forced to wear red-hot iron slippers and dance until she died.

In 1916 the story of Snow White was made into an hour-long silent movie featuring actress Marguerite Clark. It was this particular film that inspired a young Walt Disney to choose the tale of Snow White for his first full-length film.<sup>63</sup> *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* was released in 1937 and contained much of the original tale as recorded by the Grimm Brothers. Disney made changes to the Grimm Brothers' tale such as eliminating the first two attempts on her life by the queen and changing the death of

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<sup>62</sup> Grimm, Jacob and Wilhelm, *Selected Tales*, 166.

<sup>63</sup> Richard Holliss and Brian Sibley, *Walt Disney's Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs and the Making of the Classic Film*, 7.

the queen.<sup>64</sup> Creating the visual image of Snow White was particularly important because of her potential to become a kind of celebrity. Because of the many references to Snow White's beauty—as opposed to her personality, hard work, or strength of character—Disney designed his Snow White's appearance based on some of the most well-known actresses of the time.<sup>65</sup>

Disney's film was the first animated feature-length film to be commercially successful because of the new technological advances in animation and sound. The music from the film was the first soundtrack album to be released, and it helped *Snow White* become a major marketing tool for Disney. The voice of Snow White, nineteen-year-old Adriana Caselotti, often dressed as her character during publicity events. Movie posters, playing cards, figurines, and other items of material culture helped to solidify the story and characters in the minds of American and international audiences. From story book tale to film, a concrete formula for “happily ever after” was established and visually confirmed.

Carrie Mae Weems takes advantage of her viewer's familiarity with the story of Snow White. Indeed, the Grimm Brothers' version has been reproduced innumerable times in fairytale story books and *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* has been re-released every decade since its initial release in 1937. Without having to provide the entire story, Weems creates an immediate recognition of the story with the woman in front of a magic mirror. She has represented the exact moment(s) that the wicked queen hears the response of the mirror. Weems made a powerful insinuation by replacing the queen with a black

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<sup>64</sup> After poisoning Snow White she is chased to the edge of a cliff by the dwarfs. Lightening strikes the rock and the wicked queen falls to her death.

<sup>65</sup> Disney used his memories of live performances by Marguerite Clark as Snow White and also based some of her features on actress Janet Gaynor.

woman. She does not choose to place a black woman in the role of Snow White, but instead draws upon certain parallels between the story and reality. By not including Snow White in the picture, the viewer “naturally” assumes Snow White is white because she is white in all popular representations of her. Not once does Snow White ever approach the mirror. In fact, she is innocently oblivious to the source of hatred from her step-mother, and does not even know about the mirror’s existence. Much like the black female body became the antithesis for white beauty, the wicked queen’s soul is the antithesis of Snow White’s. This creates a strong connection between physiognomy and the individual self. Weems is drawing attention to the power of folklore to complicate certain cultural ideologies.

Folklore’s strong influence in Western culture has been studied for several hundred years, and folklore scholars have used these tales to explain the “advanced” evolution of Western societies. However, the study of folklore, like photography and other forms of visual culture, has also been a tool of colonial oppression against certain groups. The science of folkloristics developed in the nineteenth century in the elite field of European academia. Some of the earliest theories were based on the idea that people moved from a “primitive” past to a more civilized state of being. Such writings as *Custom and Myth* (1884) and *Myth, Ritual and Religion* (1887) by Andrew Lang provided explanations for the more seemingly irrational elements of folklore—they were survivals from a more savage past (perhaps a past that sanctioned torture with iron shoes heated on hot coals). Nineteenth century imperialists were encountering such thriving ritual and “irrational” practices in places such as African and the Caribbean, and this reinforced the idea that these groups were still abiding in their savage, undeveloped states

and had yet to evolve. The study and classification of the Other followed the scientific system popularized by Carolus Linnaeus. Linnaeus's work on the four categories of humans helped to define the concept of race and laid the foundations for other scientific studies which focused on the difference between these groups. These assertions allowed whites to explain and justify their own supremacy over other races and thus exert their dominance politically and economically. The study of folklore was thus studied and categorized in a Linnaean fashion, which irreversibly connected it to practices of imperialism.

In the United States studies on the folklore of European immigrants was common. The study of African American folklore was based on cultural links between African cultures and those found in cultures of blacks in the American South. One of the earliest studies of African American folklore was performed by Newbell Niles Puckett. Puckett published *Folk Beliefs of the Southern Negro* in 1926. In this book Puckett follows in the tradition of earlier folklorists who explain the more superstitious aspects of folklore as survivals of a more savage past. Puckett clearly states that his mission to record this folklore is based in its disappearance and inevitable demise. It was his suggestion that the disappearance of African American folklore would signal blacks' acculturation into the superior whiteness of America.

In the nearly 600 pages of text of Pucket's book there are only nine illustrations. They are all black and white photographs, and have descriptive captions such as: "A Negro Conjure-Doctor," "Songsters of Note," and "Some of My Informants." Many of the photographs seem like impromptu snapshots. They are often taken outdoors or cropped so tightly that the environment of the sitter is indiscernible. The people in these

photographs, while granted some acknowledgement of existence, are not photographed in the posed, constructed environment that Du Bois used for his Georgia Negroes Exhibit. These photographs do not serve as portraits, and none of the photographs include the names of the people pictured. Certainly it is not an issue of privacy, and the fact that the people are not named takes away their agency and individuality—their humanity, in a sense. Although the purpose of his study is to understand African American culture and often refers to informants as familiar contacts, this is again, a practice that does not allow for the individuality of the participants in Puckett’s study. This practice differs from that of scientists like Agassiz, who used images as support of evidence of racial difference. However, both men strip away the individual identities of their subjects. Images with labels such as “Some of My Informants” and the slave name labels of the Zealy daguerreotypes resound in the label of “the black woman” in Carrie Mae Weems’ work, *Mirror, Mirror*.

Weems, unlike Pucket, is both a participant and observer of African American folklore. Her interest and background in folklore is manifested in her art work and continues the countering of skewed perspectives set forth by earlier scholars. At the time of Pucket’s publication there were African Americans who studied and documented their own folklore like Zora Neale Hurston and Langston Hughes.<sup>66</sup> These scholars’ work presented the often silent voices of African Americans in reference to their own folklore. However the field of folklore developed out of the elite academic community and therefore writings by white scholars have traditionally been more prevalent and referenced than those of the African American scholars. Weems’ participation in the

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<sup>66</sup> Hurston’s work was relatively unknown until the mid-1970s when it experienced a revival among feminists and African American writers such as Toni Morrison and Maya Angelou after Alice Walker published an article about her in the March 1975 publication of *Ms. Magazine*.



field of folklore is similar to the way in which Hurston wrote both anthropological and fictional work. In *Mirror, Mirror* this is partially accomplished through the act of creating a narrative sequence. Susan Fisher Sterling writes that Weems' voice as the narrator "established an important cultural link between the work, the oral traditions of African American storytelling and the fiction of Hurston and Morrison..."<sup>67</sup> Much like the way these predecessors combined fiction with reality, *Mirror, Mirror* is the result of a constructed tableaux based on a fictional story. Yet the implications are seriously real.

Language played a large role in the conceptions of cultures in the folklore studies of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Those who studied the folklore and the producers of it presented their observations and interpretations with carefully chosen words. Specifically in the United States, both the rhetoric and the presentation of opposing vernacular languages in a text were able to influence American cultural ways of *seeing* blacks. The rhetoric employed by many of these scholars was, to today's readers, derogatory. However, at the time, the specific language used in the descriptions of the studied cultures' folk practices created the binary opposition necessary to explain the savage past versus the superiority of advanced Western culture. Puckett's book serves as an example of the importance of language in folklore studies. In his writing there is a continual use of derogatory language that implies a lower status of African Americans. In chapter one, the reader is presented with "Practical and Emotional Background" and the author sets forth "some of the more universal African characteristics."<sup>68</sup> The first three broad African traits, which are also found in American Negroes, according to Puckett, are

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<sup>67</sup> Susan Fisher Sterling, "Signifying: Photographs and Texts in the Work of Carrie Mae Weems," in *Carrie Mae Weems*, 21.

<sup>68</sup> Newbell Niles Puckett, *Folk Beliefs of the Southern Negro*, 7.

laziness, humor, and sexuality. Using citations from other scholars, Puckett also claims that “Shortsightedness, indifference, and disregard of the future are traits common not only to Africans and many Negroes, but to almost all undisciplined primitive peoples.”<sup>69</sup> Seemingly nonjudgmental statements such as these are indicative of the anti-conquest<sup>70</sup> attitude of Western imperialists—simply pointing out characteristics that by most standards are considered negative. There was also a major distinction between the written language used by academics versus the vernacular they recorded of their informants. In their effort to capture the true nature of songs, stories, and poetry, folklorists often adapted their writing to imitate the common tongue of the culture. Despite the intentions to document the “essence” of folk culture, the folklorists’ use and presentation of language often reaffirmed an attitude of superiority for its readers.

The verbal element of folklore in *Mirror, Mirror* is the text below the photograph. It is unknown where the text used below Carrie Mae Weems’ photograph originated, but this saying has its roots in African American folklore. Alan Dundes quotes the entire phrase as a reaction to “an educational system and society where the values come from white folklore.”<sup>71</sup> He explains that within this kind of system there is not much potential for a positive self-image for black students. This folklore developed in response to the persistent white folklore of Snow White. This is what Dundes describes as a socially sanctioned outlet for the expression of what cannot be articulated in the more usual,

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<sup>69</sup> Puckett, 9.

<sup>70</sup> The term anti-conquest is taken from Mary Louis Pratt’s book, *Imperial Eyes*, and refers to the type of innocent attitude of European imperialists in their pursuit of a hegemonic classification of the world.

<sup>71</sup> Alan Dundes, *Interpreting Folklore*, 49. I have been unable to find any other sources for the “Mirror, Mirror” phrase that Weems uses. It appears to be rooted in African American folklore, but I have been unable to locate any speculations for its origin or other ways it has been used.

direct way.<sup>72</sup> While American children would be familiar with the story of Snow White, African American children are not necessarily equipped with the ability to articulate the lifelong effects of mainstream society on their psyche. Therefore an alternative way of expressing this frustration develops.

The technique of altering rhetoric or narrative is a particular form of resistance illustrated by the folklore tradition of the Signifying Monkey.<sup>73</sup> Parallels between the actions of this trickster in African American narrative poetry and the construction of *Mirror, Mirror* illustrate how Carrie Mae Weems employs folklore to expose its oppressive past. Signifying Monkey “is known for disempowering opponents through a technique of using clever rhyme and rhetorical word play known as ‘signifying.’”<sup>74</sup> The act of signifying involves the empowerment of the signifier who performs his/her act through the disempowerment of the signified.<sup>75</sup> Instances of signifying have been found in songs, tales, and poetry dating back as early as the eighteenth century. Carrie Mae Weems is consciously calling attention to a specific strategy in African American history and employing it in her artistic production.

A deeper reading into the literary figure of the Signifying Monkey illuminates some of similar ways in which *Mirror, Mirror* works. The tales in which the Monkey appears are narrative myths that are not solely entertainment. The stories developed out of a particular environment of oppression as a particular form of resistance—much like the art of Carrie Mae Weems. The story of Snow White is also a narrative myth and also

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<sup>72</sup> Dundes, 36.

<sup>73</sup> For much more analysis of the Signifying Monkey see Roger D. Abrahams, *The Signifying Monkey*, and Henry Louis Gates, *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African American Literary Criticism*.

<sup>74</sup> The Greenwood Encyclopedia of African American Folklore, 866.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

served entertainment and didactic purposes. The Signifying Monkey's form stems from African Americans taking the racist image of themselves as monkeys and both repeating and reversing it.<sup>76</sup> This racist image relates specifically to images in American visual culture that are used to emphasize the alleged ugliness of blacks. *Mirror, Mirror*, works in a similar way. Without actually depicting those images or even mentioning them, the art work references the persistent cultural ways of seeing the physicality of African Americans. Many of the Signifying Monkey tales contain a theme of power struggles. *Mirror, Mirror* also addresses power struggles—the agency of African Americans to represent themselves visually, the power of women to operate successfully under societal standards for beauty, and the power of individuals to see past damaging ways of seeing.

The phrase of text used in *Mirror, Mirror* is also consistent with the “repeat and reverse” strategy of the Monkey's tactics. While the majority of the queen's conversation with the mirror is repeated, the word “fairest” has been changed to “finest.” This is a later twentieth century urban vernacular instead of one that references a white European tradition. Clearly this is tied to both a postmodern and postcolonial critique of language and the control of it. Weems' interest in using pre-existing folklore connects herself to a larger cultural movement. “While signifying is a technique used in response to white racism, its existence is not determined by that racism; rather, it is a technique of language play and word difference historically tied to black culture.”<sup>77</sup>

On the surface, *Mirror, Mirror* references the story of Snow White only in the way that it repeats a certain phrase from the well-known story. However, upon further investigation, it can be seen how Weems cleverly uses folklore in her work in order to

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<sup>76</sup> The Greenwood Encyclopedia of African American Folklore, 866.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 869.

address the powerful influence folklore and folklore studies have had over the understanding of African American culture and humanity. The metaphor of the Signifying Monkey—both as literary figure and as a strategy of resistance—within *Mirror, Mirror* connects the message of the artwork to the strong folkloric tradition of alternative resistances. The strong themes of disempowerment through repetition and reversal are evident in both the visual and verbal elements of Weems' photograph.

## CHAPTER FOUR: HUMOR'S INSIDIOUS POWER

Humor is an important element of *Mirror, Mirror*, but in a very untraditional way. The use and patterns of humor are part of larger folklore traditions with similar developmental histories. In the same way that the use of photography, visual culture, and folklore worked against African Americans, humor has also served to disempower them. The entire *Ain't Jokin* series centers on the power of racist jokes and humor in everyday life. Weems examines and presents this power by including the sayings, jokes, and rhymes as the narrative to the visual imagery in her work. In addition to the verbal humor, Weems also references the "humorous" images of blacks in visual culture. Concerning her use of humor in the *Ain't Jokin* series, she explains: "The humor is much more wicked because it has much more to do with the insidious nature of the devastatingly real effects of humor on a race of people."<sup>78</sup> However, humor has also served as a particular method of counteraction to racist ideologies. Both applications are visible in Carrie Mae Weems' work.

The original texts in the *Ain't Jokin* series were intended to maintain the lesser status of African Americans. Included are verbal jokes and sayings that were communicated between individuals and groups of people, children's rhymes, and descriptors that reference stereotypes associated with blacks. John H. Burma writes: "Any persons or groups who are the butt of jokes thereby suffer discriminatory treatment and are indirectly being relegated to an inferior status. This is, in turn, typical of conflict in general and gives additional support to the fact that humor is one of the mechanisms

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<sup>78</sup> Qtd. in *Art on My Mind*, 62.

rather frequently pressed into use in the racial conflicts of America.”<sup>79</sup> Burma is addressing the strong power of an utterance to exert control over human beings and the fact that this technique has been so frequently used in the history of the United States. Furthermore, in American culture, the power of this humor stretches beyond the audible realms into the field of visual culture.

Racist jokes are also found in visual images of African Americans. These images were most common in material culture from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries like the paper die-cut, *I’s used to whipping’* (fig. 15). Often these images were produced on trade cards, greeting cards, children’s books, product advertisements, and sheet music. The physical characteristics of blacks were reduced to very dark skin contrasted with bright white eyes. Noses, ears, and mouths were over exaggerated. Blacks were often depicted in servitude roles and children—often referred to as picaninnies—were usually wearing raggedy clothing. There was an emphasis on the stereotypes most associated with blacks: uneducated, lazy or happily laboring, the prey of alligators, and eating watermelon or fried chicken. One sympathy card (fig. 20)<sup>80</sup> depicts an African American child (presumably a girl) crying because her diaper fell off. The text below the image reads: “Life is just one trouble after another.” Although the humor is based on the fact that for a young toddler the troubles in life are reduced to diaper maintenance, food, etc. the fact that this child is black alludes to a much more troubled life. The unwritten text is that a diaper falling off is just the beginning of the trouble that this child will experience.

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<sup>79</sup> John H. Burma, “Humor as a Technique in Race Conflict,” in *Mother Wit from the Laughing Barrel*, 627.

<sup>80</sup> Due to copyright restrictions, this image is excluded. Please see: Congdon-Martin, Douglas. *Images in Black: 150 Years of Black Collectibles*, 97.

Humor that was used to maintain the inferior status of African Americans became one of the targets for African American resistance. A particular dynamic of black humor developed out of the black experience of the New World, slavery, and segregation. Joseph Boskin explains that “Three and a half centuries of oppression produced a particular style of resistance humor that entwined defiance, cunning, inventiveness, and retaliation. Stories, anecdotes, jokes, and pranks record black counteraction to oppression and also provide insight into the character of the oppression itself.”<sup>81</sup> The development of certain African American humor patterns are thus connected to specific forces of oppression. Anthropologist Mary Douglas explains that the use of jokes attacks control. Jokes have a subversive effect on the dominant structure of ideas.<sup>82</sup> Originally racist jokes were told by whites as reinforcement of the fact that African Americans had little to no power in society. However, aspects of these jokes were reappropriated by African Americans—such as the case of Weems using them in her work. This demonstrates the ability of African Americans to claim control and demonstrate their actual power in society. The use of these jokes by Weems is therefore not a new pattern of humor. Instead it is a pattern that simultaneously references the history of white oppression while disrupting the forces that continue to work against African Americans.

Carrie Mae Weems’ developed an interest in the power and prevalence of jokes while studying at the University of California at Berkeley. During her graduate work Weems was particularly drawn to the large collection of jokes in the archives of Berkeley’s Folklore Program. She developed an understanding of how humor can be used to communicate much larger issues. She see jokes as “a social barometer and as a socially

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<sup>81</sup> Boskin, “African-American Humor: Resistance and Retaliation,” 137.

<sup>82</sup> Douglas, *Implicit Meanings: Essays in Anthropology*, 95.



sanctioned way to discuss topics that, while of obvious current interest, would otherwise be considered unmentionable.”<sup>83</sup> Her investigation into the realm of humor with the *Ain't Jokin* series includes both visual and verbal kinds of humor.

There is one particular work from the series that addresses both the visual and verbal types of racist humor. *What's a cross between and ape and a nigger?* is a diptych of two silver prints (fig. 21).<sup>84</sup> The left side is frontal view of a gorilla's face. Below the photograph is black block text: “What's a cross between an ape and a.” The right photograph is a black man in profile. He is turned toward the gorilla as if he is looking at the ape. Below the man's picture is the word “Nigger?” In order for the viewer to find out the answer to this question—or rather, the punchline—he or she must slide a panel beneath the photographs. The answer to the question is just as offensive as the original question: a mentally retarded ape. Not only does this joke use a racist term to refer to African Americans, but it more painfully implies that the intellect of an African Americans is less than that of a gorilla.

The *Cross Between* photograph also references the early “scientific” photographs of specimens that were analyzed previously. Its composition is similar to the way J.T. Zealy photographed slaves in both frontal and profile views. The combination of man and ape in the same format implies that to some, they are interchangeable. By juxtaposing a gorilla with a human being Weems is making reference to the common physical comparisons made between African Americans and monkeys. The fact that jokes were

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<sup>83</sup> Andrea Kirsch, “Carrie Mae Weems: Issues in Black, White, and Color,” 13.

<sup>84</sup> Due to copyright restrictions, this image is excluded. Please see: Kirsch, Andrea and Susan Fisher Sterling. *Carrie Mae Weems*, 14.

created to emphasize these comparisons illustrates how commonly racist rhetoric operated in American society. This is literalized, too, in physiognomic studies.

For most twenty-first century viewers, the racist images and jokes are uncomfortable. It is hard to imagine images such as these circulating in contemporary society as they did originally. Racist jokes are considered taboo, and when they are told, it is usually within a particular environment in which a member of the race that is the butt of the joke is absent. In the creation and exhibition of this series, Carrie Mae Weems has inverted the social circumstances in which the jokes and images exist. She takes advantage of the uncomfortable feeling of “hearing” racist jokes in order to create an environment of self-consciousness. It is even more unusual for the viewer to have to manipulate the art work in order to find out the punchline to some of the riddles. Not only does it go against the usual procedure in an art gallery to touch the art work, but it also forces the person to decide: do I want to know the answer to this question? What will happen if I laugh? Does that mean I am racist? From this experience comes confusion, laughter, anger. These emotions are tied much more closely to the content of the work than the formal aesthetic qualities. Although the artist is physically absent she wields power over the viewer.

Once again the act of signifying becomes relevant in Weems’ work. In this instance it is concerned with power structures. The tales of the Signifying Monkey involve the disruption of hierarchical structures. The Monkey, who appears to be weaker, demonstrates his superiority through cleverness and intellect. Weems challenges the perceived racial structures by drawing upon that which has, in the past, signified that

African Americans are “weaker.” In this situation, the African American artist is control of the environment—actualizing the literary trope in a real, cultural space.

Weems also takes advantage of signifying in *Mirror, Mirror* through the use of text that is insulting in nature. The surprise ending to the phrase and the use of the word “bitch” reference different humor practices in African American culture. The word “bitch” is most commonly known as a pejorative term for women. Although it can be used in generic reference to objects and things, the word “remains a controversial but useful idiom in black folklore traditions such as music and comedy.”<sup>85</sup> In the context of the late twentieth century the word developed much of its connotation through rap music. The Greenwood Encyclopedia of African American Folklore explains that male rappers have used gender-specific epithets to control and dominate women.<sup>86</sup> Even beyond the context of the African American dominated music industry the term “bitch” developed as a way to demean females. However, one of the reasons Weems uses the phrase that includes the word is to demonstrate fractures within the African American community. This point illustrates the argument that *Mirror, Mirror* is not specifically about black versus white, but also disharmony among African Americans.

The grappling of word connotation in Weems’ work is evidence of her interest in the power and implications of language. The ability to use the word “bitch” challenges the ownership of the word. The context in which it is placed, and who offers the utterance also determines its connotation. More broadly, the use of racist jokes and sayings in the art work of an African American woman demonstrates her power to reclaim that which has worked against her personally and as an individual who is part of a larger community.

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<sup>85</sup> The Greenwood Encyclopedia of African American Folklore, 129.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

The viewer who engages with the images in the *Ain't Jokin* series must confront his or her own relationship with racist humor, but also come to terms with the fact that a black woman brings this kind of damaging humor out into the open. Structures such as language, which can reinforce racial difference, begin to break down. *Mirror, Mirror* is not only using African American folklore traditions as a form of resistance, but the piece then becomes part of the resistance toolbox that is continually being applied to break open and destroy the myths of race and gender.

## CONCLUSION

Photography, popular images of African Americans, folklore, and humor have all been used as tools of social or colonial power in the United States. Not only were visual and verbal texts created as a form of oppression, but they circulated and were successful in solidifying certain ways of seeing and thinking about race. *Mirror, Mirror* exposes these practices in order to demystify and denaturalize them. On the one hand, Weems builds on the tools used by Euro-Americans to maintain their privileged place in American culture. She specifically references nineteenth century ethnographic photography, popular stereotypes in advertising and visual culture, the academic study of folklore, and humor. At the same time, Weems unmoors these tools from their traditional uses. She specifically uses photography to create a fictional narrative. By posing a black woman in front of a mirror she acknowledges the role of the black female body in fine art and popular culture. She uses African American folklore in her work in order to disrupt the negative depiction of African Americans in Western folkloristics. Finally, through the reappropriation of racist humor Weems “signifies” on the hierarchal structures of power.

Weems is by no means the first African American to use these tools to interrupt and undermine racism. W.E.B. Du Bois applied the techniques of “white” photography to work against the ways in which photographs served as “real” evidence of black racial difference. These techniques were specifically based on the physical presentation of the humor form in regards to clothing, surrounding environment. Zora Neal Hurston and Langston Hughes provided an insider’s view to African American folklore in contrast to outsider observations by scholars like Pucket. Many African Americans have found ways

to “own” forms of oppression through reclamation and reappropriation. The “Black is Beautiful” movement challenged African American women to embrace the natural qualities of their hair and reject the mainstream standards. Many musicians and comedians have incorporated taboo words into their own vernacular. The goals of these responses have often been resistance, acceptance, equality, and respect. More importantly, the responses to oppressive forces have demonstrated individual and group power against alienation.

Carrie Mae Weems’s work in *Mirror, Mirror* employs the use of certain tools of subjugation in order to exemplify the ways in which black women have been particularly isolated in regards to their physiognomy. The story of Snow White is a metaphor for the constructed reality that black women will never be considered the “fairest” because they do not fall into hegemonic categories of beauty. More importantly, the power of Weems’s work stretches even further. It deconstructs the notion that there actually is an ideal female on which the notions of beauty are based. Much like the story of Snow White is a fictitious creation, the myth of the ideal woman is nothing more than a creation of society. The focus of the Snow White story is centered on the wicked queen—the Other—rather than on Snow White. Similarly the presentation of the ideal form emphasizes that which is different from itself. The strength of the myth relies on fiction.

*Mirror, Mirror* also calls to attention the persistence of certain ideologies in American culture. Women continue to engage in the daily mirror ritual. Despite powerful images such as *Mirror, Mirror* the worship of the ideal still exists. Whether in openly racist social groups or in the quiet utterance of taboo jokes racism manifested in visual culture and humor still exists. Weems calls upon the viewer of her work to take

responsibility for the continued existence of such structures: “If you decide that we are all party to the crime then it makes sense that we all are held accountable. You could then point to the viewer and say “you” and “us” as opposed to “they.”<sup>87</sup> The black woman in *Mirror, Mirror* demonstrates that we are contributors. She is holding the frame of the mirror and therefore, is given an authorship role in the entire experience. The woman, as a representative for all, is also charged with the responsibility to respond accordingly. bell hooks writes that, “We have to create a kind of critical culture where we can discuss the issue of blackness in ways that confront not only the legacy of subjugation but also radical traditions of resistance, as well as the newly invented self, the decolonized subject.”<sup>88</sup> Furthermore, we must actively work to create a society in which all forms of oppression are eliminated. In order to exist in an environment of understanding and respect, no group can use difference as a measure of value.

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<sup>87</sup> Weems in *Interventions and Provocations*, 59.

<sup>88</sup> bell hooks, *Art of My Mind*, 93.

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## VITA

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