

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

Susan Wood

Dr. Kristin Schwain, Thesis Supervisor

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.