

**Oppositional Reflections:  
Carrie Mae Weems and Narcissister Reclaim the Mirror**

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## Abstract

Across their different artistic practices, photographer Carrie Mae Weems and performance artist Narcissister both work to subvert conventional myopic definitions of vanity and narcissism through the oppositional use of 'the mirror.' To understand the symbolic function of the mirror in their artwork and its function in contemporary visual culture, one must consider a genealogy of vanity and narcissism. Western society's contemporary characterization of 'narcissism' conflates excessive interest in oneself, particularly in one's physical appearance, with egocentrism and megalomania. 'Vanity' is a similarly derogatory term that is often associated with femininity both historically and contemporarily. The symbolic coding of the mirror as an object of feminine vanity has been significantly impacted by allegorical depictions of ideal femininity in European oil painting between the 13<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Weems and Narcissister transform the allegorical mirror from a moralizing symbolic device into a tool for the deflection of false imagery that has been imposed upon their subjectivities.

Contemporary definitions of narcissism and vanity identify a subject's preoccupation with their self-image as unhealthy; with little consideration of the impact subjectivity has on the construction of a positive self-image. In keeping with this false assumption, traditional interpretations of narcissism and vanity as moral vices ignore gender difference and its intersectional<sup>1</sup> relationship to racial inequity. Through a formal analysis of the artists' work, I argue that Weems and Narcissister reclaim the tropological mirror and redefine vanity and narcissism's relationship to black female subjectivity. I intend to identify the gendered limits and latent racism of traditional theories of narcissism and vanity as I reexamine the historical misuse of the mirror and its potential to be repurposed by subjects who are marginalized by dominant visual culture and modes of looking.

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<sup>1</sup> Kimberle Crenshaw coined the term "intersectionality" in her essay "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics," *University of Chicago Legal Forum*: Volume 1989: Issue 1, Article 8.

## Introduction

Mirror gazing must be done in private. The contemporary subject cannot be caught looking at themselves, cannot capture their own mirror image in public, without inhibition. Inconspicuous reflective surfaces are seamlessly integrated throughout our contemporary environment so that we may discreetly check our appearances and technology provides us with additional access to our reflection allowing us to establish our physical presence in the expanding digital world. Yet the contemporary subject cannot mirror gaze publically without experiencing external judgment. Mirrors provide a physical terrain across which subjects can construct their visual and psychological identity. For many subjects the judgmental gazes of others are echoed back to them within these reflective surfaces; the mirror itself becomes a psychological presence that accompanies them wherever they go, reminding them of how they look or how they should look.<sup>2</sup> These narrow ontological spaces are overwhelmingly inflexible. However, mirrors have the potential to be transformed into tools for self-defense, providing the subject with a semblance of control over their elusive, shifting image.

In early life 'the mirror' is an instrument used to stimulate our conceptualization of the self, and as we grow it becomes a site through which we

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<sup>2</sup> John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, television series, produced by Mike Dibb (British Broadcasting Corporation, 1972).

can critically examine and construct our subjectivity. We are encouraged to utilize the mirror as an apparatus to anticipate the judgment of others, yet the mirror also provides us with the opportunity to visualize our potential outside of this judgment. I contend that the subject's relationship to 'the mirror' is predicated on the amount of privilege their subjectivity affords them within Western culture and society. Those who are alienated by patriarchy, white supremacy, and heteronormativity, for instance, may find it difficult to face their reflections without shame. However, due to the overbearing presence of such privileging cultural forces, marginalized subjects are conditioned to continually check their reflections, hoping to find a validating image of self-presence.

In the history of Western art, the mirror has been symbolically coded largely as an object that is synonymous with feminine vanity.<sup>3</sup> Critical engagement with oneself and self-expression through mirror gazing has been historically degraded by the tradition of allegorical painting, which fuses vanity with femininity, as I will thoroughly discuss in the second chapter of this thesis. Critics of narcissism see preoccupation with one's self-image as unnecessary and excessive. The advent of the front-facing camera phone<sup>4</sup> has ushered in a new sense of anxiety in contemporary Western culture about vanity and narcissism,

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<sup>3</sup> For a thorough description of this transformation see *The Genealogy of the Mirror and Feminine Vanity* on page 7 of this thesis.

<sup>4</sup> In 2010 Apple released the iPhone 4 which featured the first front-facing camera phone. "Apple Presents iPhone 4," *Apple Press Info*, June 7, 2010, accessed April 4, 2016, <http://www.apple.com/pr/library/2010/06/07Apple-Presents-iPhone-4.html>.

reviving historical criticism of mirror gazing and self-imaging as a dangerous form of self-absorption.<sup>5</sup> The mainstream critique of selfie culture as evidence of increased narcissism disregards the role that our subjectivities play in shaping our relationship to our mirrored image, ignoring the experiences of minoritized subjects who rarely glimpse positive, non-stereotypical representations of

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<sup>5</sup> After the release of the iPhone 4 in 2010 selfies became increasingly popular as evidenced in the growth of the hashtags “#me” and “#selfie” on Instagram. By 2012 the term “selfie” was commonly used by mainstream media sources and in 2013 The Oxford Dictionaries confirmed the trend’s overwhelming popularity by making “selfie” the word of the year. Widespread backlash against selfies began shortly thereafter as both major news forums and online tabloids published a slew of articles labeling them narcissistic. These articles often linked selfies to the insecurity of teenage girls. In 2014 the online tabloid, *Mirror*, covered the case of Danny Bowman, a teenage boy who tried to kill himself after being unable to take the perfect selfie. Since that time selfies have been consistently categorized as symptomatic of an increase in narcissism by the mainstream media. Most recently Rawhide.org created an infographic outlining the connections between clinical narcissism and selfie taking. “The Oxford Dictionaries Word of the Year 2013: SELFIE,” *OxfordWords blog*, November 19, 2013, <http://blog.oxforddictionaries.com/press-releases/oxford-dictionaries-word-of-the-year-2013/>; “Self-portraits and social media: The rise of the 'selfie',” BBC News, June 7, 2013, accessed April 4, 2016, <http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-22511650>; Gemma Aldridge and Kerry Harden, “Selfie addict took TWO HUNDRED a day - and tried to kill himself when he couldn't take perfect photo,” *Mirror*, March 23, 2014, updated March 26, 2014, accessed April 4, 2016, <http://www.mirror.co.uk/news/real-life-stories/selfie-addict-took-two-hundred-3273819>; Fiona Keating, “Selfies Linked to Narcissism, Addiction and Mental Illness, Say Scientists,” *International Business Times*, March 23, 2014, accessed April 4, 2016, <http://www.ibtimes.co.uk/selfies-linked-narcissism-addiction-mental-illness-say-scientists-1441480>; Irfan Ahmad, “Selfie Obsession: The Rise of Social Media Narcissism - #infographic,” *Digital Information World*, January 10, 2016, accessed April 4, 2016, <http://www.digitalinformationworld.com/2016/01/infographic-selfie-obsession-the-rise-of-social-media-narcissism.html>.

themselves reflected in visual media.<sup>6</sup> It is similarly misguided to categorize an artist's representation of their complicated relationship to the mirror as inherently vain or narcissistic without first considering how their subjectivity might influence this relationship.

Neither mirrors, nor camera phones, are to blame for their historical and contemporary coding as objects of feminine vanity and narcissism. There are feminist artists, in particular female feminist artists of color, who have worked to transform the allegorical mirror from a chastising symbolic device into a tool for the deflection of false imagery that has been imposed upon their subjectivity. In this thesis I will discuss two such contemporary artists, trailblazing and well-established<sup>7</sup> photographer Carrie Mae Weems and emerging performance artist Narcissister, whose work is just beginning to gain recognition within the art

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<sup>6</sup> As journalist Syreeta McFadden notes, "While the mainstream may not yet reflect a wide, true and constructed representation of people of color, we're creating space for that existence in the cyber world. We're cultivating a vernacular to understand our images beyond stilted paradigms." "Selfies allow black women to say we are here, and we are beautiful," *The Guardian*, February 2014, accessed April 4, 2016, <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/feb/24/selfies-black-women-we-are-here-we-are-beautiful>.

<sup>7</sup> Weems's work as been displayed in numerous solo and group exhibitions on the national and international level including The Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Frist Center for Visual Art, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York, Prospect.3 New Orleans, and the Centro Andaluz de Arte Contemporáneo in Seville, Spain. She has received many awards, grants, and fellowships including the Prix de Roma, The National Endowment of the Arts, the Alpert, the Anonymous was a Woman, the Tiffany Awards, and in 2013 she received the MacArthur "Genius" grant as well as the Congressional Black Caucus Foundation's Lifetime Achievement Award. "Carrie Mae Weems," Jack Shainman Gallery, <http://www.jackshainman.com/artists/carriemae-weems>, accessed March 30, 2016.

world and popular culture.<sup>8</sup> Although Weems and Narcissister have distinctly different artistic practices, they both create work that opposes the negative racialized and gendered stereotypes that are often ascribed to their subjectivities as black women. Both artists mobilize many symbolic tropes that are associated with feminine vanity and narcissism in their artwork. Carrie Mae Weems's photographic work is in direct dialogue with the symbolic function of the vanity mirror in historical portraiture, while Narcissister's videos, performances, and sculptures adopt a DIY, digital aesthetic that is in direct dialogue with narcissism in the new media age. Through a formal analysis of their artwork that strives to be cognizant of the complex relationship that black women have to invisibility and hypervisibility, I argue that Weems and Narcissister demolish conventional definitions of vanity and narcissism in their

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<sup>8</sup> Narcissister is a Brooklyn based artist who has presented her work at The New Museum, Moma PS 1, The Kitchen, and at Abrons Art Center and internationally at the Music Biennale in Zagreb, Croatia, at Chicks on Speed's Girl Monster Festival, at The City of Women Festival in Ljubljana, Slovenia, at Warehouse 9, Copenhagen's first live art festival, and at the Camp/Anti-Camp festival in Berlin. Crossing the divide between popular entertainment and experimental art, Narcissister appeared on America's Got Talent in 2011 and in December of 2015 she appeared in Canadian shock rocker Peaches's music video "Rub." Her film "The Self-Gratifier" won an award for "Best Use of a Sex Toy" at The 2008 Good Vibrations Erotic Film Festival and her film "Vaseline" won the main prize of this festival in 2013. She had her first solo gallery exhibition "Narcissister is You" at envoy enterprises in February 2013. Narcissister is a 2015 Creative Capital Fellow, a 2015 Theo Westernberger Grantee, and a 2015 United States Artists Fellow. "CV," Narcissister, <http://www.narcissister.com/page-cv>, accessed March 30, 2016; Zoe Camp, "Peaches' Crazy "Rub" Video Features Full-Frontal Nudity, Sex Acts, Public Urination, and More," Pitchfork, <http://pitchfork.com/news/62358-peaches-crazy-rub-video-features-full-frontal-nudity-sex-acts-public-urination-and-more>, published December 2<sup>nd</sup> 2015, accessed March 30, 2016.

own unique aesthetic vernacular precisely by working at the intersection of gender and race.

The essence of my project is to reveal that “vanity” and “narcissism” are criticisms that are imposed upon subjects who engage with the mirror without any consideration of the degree to which the individual’s subjectivity dictates their relationship to the mirror. Acknowledging the limitations of my own subjectivity as a white woman in relationship to my discourse is a crucial component of dismantling the false universality of femininity within historical and contemporary feminist theory. As feminism is experiencing an unprecedented flood of acceptance in Western popular culture, the historical lack of self-reflexivity amongst white-presenting, cis-gendered feminists remains prevalent. This thesis intends to re-center the discourse on feminist art practices that dare to strategically mobilize ‘acts of vanity and narcissism’ as a mode of resistance vis-a-vi the experience of black femininity. In other words, thinking about the continuum that exists between Carrie Mae Weems and Narcissister verses Hannah Wilke and Narcissister. It is not my intention to appropriate or romanticize the experiences of subjects who are structurally afforded less privilege than myself, rather it is my goal to consider how these artist’s work reveals the extent to which stereotypical definitions of vanity and narcissism are simultaneously gendered and raced. I am invested in acknowledging that self-love often remains elusive for disempowered subjects and that mirror gazing can become an act of defiance.

## I.

### **The Genealogy of 'The Mirror' and Feminine Vanity**

The mirror has an overbearing presence in the conceptualization of the modern psyche. As elaborated in the work of Jacques Lacan, the profound impact that the mirror stage has on our construction of self cannot be overstated. The infant's germinal interaction with the mirror image marks their earliest integrated experience of the "self" as a whole.<sup>9</sup> Lacan describes this development of the ego, the moment of substantiated integration, as simultaneously unifying and alienating. The mirror provides us with an illusion of wholeness (the Ideal-I) that we do not actually possess as fragmented beings. The infant's identification with the image of itself in the mirror also marks their recognition of the self as internally divided.<sup>10</sup> This division marks the experience of the self as "other."<sup>11</sup>

Although the example at the heart of Lacan's mirror stage is primarily focused on an infant's interaction with a literal mirror, it is important to note that the individuation of self also happens through the infant's experience of the gaze of their caretaker.<sup>12</sup> It is through the caretaker's gaze that the infant's

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<sup>9</sup> Jacques Lacan, "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience," *Écrits: A Selection* (New York: Norton, 1977), 2-7.

<sup>10</sup> Ideal-I is the fragmented self's ideation of a stable and fixed autonomous image of itself. The Ideal-I is aspired towards but never attained.

<sup>11</sup> Lacan differentiates between a lowercase "other," signifying the othered self contained within the whole of the fragmented self, and a capital "Other," signifying other people who the self recognizes as outside of itself.

<sup>12</sup> Elizabeth Grosz, "The Ego and the Imaginary," *Jacques Lacan: A Feminist Introduction* (London: Routledge, 1990), 32.

mirror image of itself as “other” is first established. This component of the mirror stage occurs when the infant begins to accept their caretaker’s absence. It provides the infant with the desire for control and self-mastery that the subject lacks, which its caretaker previously fulfilled through the gratification of its needs.<sup>13</sup>

While in early life ‘the mirror’ may serve as a catalyst for our conceptualization of self, its function evolves as we grow; the mirror becomes a site through which we think critically—both analytically and in self-deprecating ways—about our subjectivity. Regardless of whether or not one believes that the self or the subject is transitory or a fixed component of existence, it is our experience of subjectivity that dictates our relationship to the world. There are many ‘mirrors’ within the contemporary psyche. The mirror is not only an originary place where we derive a sense of self, it is a physical site where our psychological self is continuously constructed and deconstructed. This pervasive force is manifested physically in the form of literal mirrors, reflective surfaces that act like mirrors, electronic devices that capture our image, in the glances of Others that remind us of our mirror image and our desire for oneness with our Ideal-I, and finally in the idealized mirroring from the Other. Although the mirror’s presence in contemporary life is active symbolically in the form of gazes that manifest themselves in the physical realm and gazes that are mediated by

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<sup>13</sup> Elizabeth Grosz, "The Ego and the Imaginary," *Jacques Lacan: A Feminist Introduction* (London: Routledge, 1990), 32.

technology, some of us are conscripted to particularly narrow bandwidths of space that are contingent upon our subjectivity. This thesis is concerned with those mirrors that function to put contemporary subjects in their place. In these confined spaces, mirrors follow us everywhere—yet we must never be caught looking into them.

In the context of contemporary art and visual culture, mirrors have come to symbolize vanity, a form of self-obsession that is characterized by its superficiality. The instrumental role that mirrors played in the historical conceptualization of vanity as a negative psychological flaw has perpetuated their conflation with vanity in the construction of the modern psyche. The unique form of self-imaging that mirrors provided largely enabled the construction of both vanity *and* subjectivity. This transformation can be traced back to antiquity. Before metal and glass were adapted to create stable and permanent reflective surfaces, the earliest mirrors existed as bodies of water upon which fluttering, temporal reflections could be cast.<sup>14</sup> Stories of pathological narcissism reach back to the Greek myth of Narcissus, the vain youth known for his beauty, who became spellbound by his own reflection and eventually wasted away at the edge of a pool of water.<sup>15</sup> As the tale of Narcissus demonstrates, the mirror often appears in moralizing narratives that caution readers from becoming obsessed with their image.

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<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, 590-93

<sup>15</sup> Ovid, "Book III, The Wrath of Juno: Narcissus." *Ovid: Metamorphoses*, trans. Charles Martin (New York: W.W. Norton, 2004) 104-11.

The question of morality evolved during the Middle Ages and expanded as mirrors became more accessible during the Renaissance.<sup>16</sup> However, a mirror's moral function differed greatly across the lines of gender since the time of antiquity. For men, a mirror could be a source of philosophical contemplation, as Platonism of the Middle Ages favored sight as the primary means to acquire knowledge.<sup>17</sup> Prior to the Middle Ages, Socrates was a supporter of mirror gazing and believed that, if it was used properly, the mirror could "aid in moral mediation between man and himself."<sup>18</sup> In keeping with the views of Plato's teacher Socrates, many Platonists defended mirrors as objects of educational inquiry that allowed them to challenge themselves intellectually and to identify their physical strengths and weaknesses, fulfilling their desire to "know thyself."<sup>19</sup> For these men, mirrors provided objective truth.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Sabine Melchior-Bonnet, "From Luxury to Necessity." *The Mirror: A History* (New York: Routledge, 2001) 70-94.

<sup>17</sup> Sabine Melchior-Bonnet, "The Semblance of God." *The Mirror: A History* (New York: Routledge, 2001)101.

<sup>18</sup> Socrates's pupil, Diogenes, noted that Socrates encouraged students to mirror gaze "so that, if they were beautiful they would become worthy of their beauty, and if they were ugly, they would know how to hide their disgrace through learning." He saw the mirror as a transformative tool by which man could avoid pride, recognize his limits, and improve himself. Diogenes also notes that Socrates presented drunkards with a mirror so that they could see their reflections disfigured by wine. *Ibid*, 106

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*, 105-6.

<sup>20</sup> A mirror's potential for discovery of philosophical truths was echoed by religious thought during the Middle Ages, "He who sees himself in the mirror of the Bible simultaneously realizes the splendor of God and his own wretchedness, 'See if you are who He says you are. If you are not yet so, pray that you may be; he will show you his face.' (*Ennaratio in Psalms*, 103)," *Ibid*, 110.

In contrast, the literature and imagery of white European women and mirrors during this time period portrayed these women as superficial and deceitful, as they utilized the mirror to entice men. The mirror became a part of religious vocabulary in the Middle Ages, offering the onlooker the reflection of God or the face of the devil. In the case of women, the mirror was associated with witchcraft and devil worship, provoking lust, envy, and vanity. The narrative of original sin became a significant subject in art throughout the Middle Ages and well into the Renaissance. From the thirteenth century onward Eve is often depicted holding a mirror, which was symbolic of her deceit of Adam.<sup>21</sup> In many representations of the fall of man the serpent appears with a reptilian body and a feminine human head that mirrors Eve's facial features.<sup>22</sup> Women who mirror gazed were portrayed as vapid sinners who would be punished with a torturous afterlife in works such as Albrecht Dürer's *Diabolique Coquetterie*, Hans Balding Grün *The Three Ages and Death*, Sebastian Brandt's *Ship of Fools*, and Hieronymus Bosch's *The Garden of Earthly Delights*. Yet, for a noblewoman whose value was based upon her appearance, a mirror was one of the few tools at her disposal that enabled her to objectively measure her worth, enhance her

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<sup>21</sup> "Lust is associated with Vanity, both metaphorical daughters of Eve." Sabine Melchior-Bonnet, "The Semblance of God." *The Mirror: A History* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 200.

<sup>22</sup> See Masolino's "Temptation of Adam and Eve" c. 1425 (Brancacci Chapel, S. Maria del Carmine, Florence Italy), Hugo van der Goes "The Fall of Adam and Eve" c. 1470 (Kusthistorisches Museum, Vienna), Hieronymus Bosch's first panel in "The Last Judgement" triptych c.1482 (Academy of Fine Art's Vienna), and Michelangelo's "Fall and Expulsion of Adam and Eve" c. 1510 (Sistine Chapel, Vatican, Rome).

beauty and, hence, her value to men.<sup>23</sup> A line from Bérenger de la Tour d'Albenas's poem "Le Miroir" declared, "Wise mirror who dictates and polices Beauty," however it was not the mirror, but upper class men of intellectual stature who defined beauty and shaped women's relationship to the mirror in accordance with that definition.<sup>24</sup> In the third chapter of John Berger's classic 1973 text on visual culture, *Ways of Seeing*, Berger offers a critique of the moralizing depictions of feminine vanity, which expanded from the Middle Ages into the genre of allegorical painting during the Renaissance:

You painted a naked woman because you enjoyed looing at her, you put a mirror in her hand and you called the painting *Vanity*, thus morally condemning the woman whose nakedness you depicted for your own pleasure. The real function of the mirror was otherwise. It was to make the woman connive in treating herself as, first and foremost, a sight.<sup>25</sup>

A kept noblewoman of high social class was obligated to demonstrate the wealth of her husband by the opulence of her toilet, through the elaborate ritual of bathing, beautifying, and dressing. Her daily task was complete when she was

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<sup>23</sup> In his guide to heraldry and noble life, *Blasons domestiques*, Aesop Gilles Corrozet (1510-1568) characterized mirrors as an essential component of home furnishing, specifying that they allowed a noble lady to "remove stains of 'ugliness' from the soul, to beautify her face and foster love," Sabine Melchior-Bonnet, "The Semblance of God." *The Mirror: A History* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 137.

<sup>24</sup> "The doctor Jean Liebault, author of *Agriculture et Maison rustique* (1564), before detailing in five hundred pages the methods a woman might use to come to terms with, and then, if needed, forget her loss of grace, reminded her of the necessity of harmonizing her soul with her body," *Ibid*, 137.

<sup>25</sup> Here Berger is specifically referring to the central panel in a triptych by Hans Memling, *Triptych of Earthly Vanity and Divine Salvation* c. 1485, which combines the chastising image of a woman gazing into a mirror in the central panel, flanked by demonic imagery of death in the surrounding panels. John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: British Broadcasting, 1973), 51.

ready to become a sight for her husband and his guests.<sup>26</sup> Thus, upper class white women of this historical time period were put into a double bind in which they were encouraged to have a superficial relationship with their mirrors while they were simultaneously chastised for being preoccupied with their appearance and for “tricking” men into becoming enamored by their false beauty. Sabine Melchior-Bonnet, whose book *The Mirror: A History* provides a thorough analysis of the mirror through the ages, states, “Femininity is a creation of the mirror,” demonstrating how intensely feminine identity has been tied to the mirror. Berger’s text critiques the allegorical depictions of vanity, describing the effect this lineage has on white women in 1973. The historical assimilation of vanity into femininity must be considered in relationship to our contemporary definitions of vanity and narcissism, particularly when we are examining the work of artists whose subjectivities are implicated and alienated by these definitions.

Although historical allegorical portraits of ideal feminine beauty—which routinely feature the languid form of an alabaster goddess staring into a mirror—play a significant role in our contemporary visual definition of vanity, they are not solely responsible for the conflation of femininity with superficial self-absorption. Nor is vanity simply a form of narcissism that is specific to feminine genders. It is when we begin to uncover the assumptions surrounding

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<sup>26</sup> This is best exemplified by *Portrait of Diane de Poitiers* c. 1590 in which Diane is depicted nude from the waist up surrounded by precious pieces of jewelry and extravagant accessories that demonstrated King Henri II’s wealth and power.

these images of vanity that we are able to recognize that very few mirrors reflect the diverse set of circumstances that correspond to a person's subjectivity.

In short, the briefest genealogies of the mirror show what a misnomer 'the mirror' is. There are many mirrors. The mirror at the core of Lacan's mirror stage, arguably, assumes that the infant's subjectivity is neutral. Yet genealogies of the mirror, such as the one outlined above, speak to the impossibility of this neutrality. That is to say that Lacan does not account for the impact that gender and race (nor any other less physically apparent social signifiers) will have upon the subject's experience of self beyond the mirror stage, but his theory of the mirror stage creates space for the discussion of race and gender.<sup>27</sup>

The infant's experience of the mirror stage is profound, however our attraction to our image and our ability to autonomously construct an image of ourselves is not universally acceptable or accessible to us as we mature. Lacan's unmarked<sup>28</sup> infant experiences a singular ah-ha moment, when he realizes that

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<sup>27</sup> David Marriott expands upon Lacan's mirror theory as he analyzes the fracturing of the imago within the black psyche citing two examples of racial misrecognition, the first a four-year-old girl fixated by her image in a mirror and the second a famous encounter between Frantz Fanon and a white French boy, in "Bonding Over Phobia" *Haunted Life: Visual Culture and Black Modernity* (New Brunswick: Rutgers, 2007)

<sup>28</sup> As Peggy Phelan describes the unequal distribution of value through the construction of sexual difference in *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*, "One term of the binary is marked with value, the other is unmarked. The male is marked with value; the female is unmarked, the lacking measured value and meaning. Within this psycho-philosophical frame, cultural reproduction takes she who is unmarked and re-marks her, rhetorically and imagistically, while he who is marked with value is left unremarked, in discursive paradigms and visual fields. He is the norm and therefore unremarkable; as the Other, it is she whom

he is the image in the mirror and the image in the mirror corresponds to his subjectivity. However the unmarked infant's neutrality is false. His falsely universal subjectivity insulates him from the kind of fragmentation that will be felt by the child whose subjectivity results in its systematic oppression beyond the mirror stage. This is not to suggest that the mirror stage infant is able to recognize the physical characteristics that will lead to their oppression or privilege later in life, as this is impossible at 12-18 months of age. Instead I suggest that the unmarked infant's relationship to the mirror remains secure throughout his life due to his hegemonic privilege, which coincides with the subject's race, class, gender, and sexual orientation.

Lacan's mirror stage has become accepted within psychoanalytic theory as the foundational explanation of the subject's relationship to their own image and for its impact upon theories of vision, image, and the gaze. Both Freud and Lacan agree that, prior to the mirror stage, all infants possess a kind of self-directed focus, called "primary (or infantile) narcissism."<sup>29</sup> During this time the infant is both subject and object. Freud sees this as a natural, necessary stage in the development of self-love but specifies that a 'new' psychical action must

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he marks." Thus cultural representation seeks to both conceal and reveal a socially constructed real that proves difference (sexual, racial) is a real difference. The unmarked subject secures the invisibility of his subjectivity by emphasizing the "difference" of the Other. Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (London: Routledge: 1993), 5.

<sup>29</sup> Sigmund Freud, "On the Introduction of Narcissism" (1914), trans. Richard G. Klein, 88-100; Jacques Lacan, "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience," *Écrits: A Selection* trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Norton, 1977), 507.

occur in order to initiate the genesis of the ego.<sup>30</sup> Lacan accounts for the genesis of the ego through the mirror stage, which signifies the end of the infant's primary narcissism. Once the infant is able to recognize that they are separate from the Other, their self-love is directed outwards and away from themselves. Those who do not direct their desires outwards are doomed to be classified as "secondary narcissists," from which our colloquial understanding of contemporary narcissism is derived.

I have already claimed that Freud and Lacan's discourse assumes the neutrality of the subject. Yet this neutrality is glaringly false as both scholars use masculine pronouns to describe the subject and do not address race.<sup>31</sup> The description of secondary narcissism also assumes an unmarked subject and there is no rhetoric to account for the existence of infants who will be othered as they mature within hegemonic society. I suggest that self-love is inhibited by cultural alienation that is specific to one's subjectivity. Critical theorist David

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<sup>30</sup> Elizabeth Grosz, "The Ego and the Imaginary," *Jacques Lacan: A Feminist Introduction* (London: Routledge, 1990), 31.

<sup>31</sup> Many feminist theorists have critiqued Freud for the sexist tone of his discourse including, but not limited to: Simone De Beauvoir, "The Psychoanalytic Point of View," *The Second Sex* (New York: Knopf, 1953), 38-52. She writes, "In particular psychoanalysis fails to explain why woman is the *Other*. For Freud himself admits that the prestige of the penis is explained by the sovereignty of the father, and, as we have seen, he confesses that he is ignorant regarding the origin of male supremacy."; Former student of Lacan, Luce Irigaray critiques both Freud and Lacan in "The Blind Spot of an Old Dream of Symmetry," *Speculum of the Other Woman* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell, 1985), 11-113; Julia Kristeva critiques Freud and Lacan as well as De Beauvoir and Irigaray as she contends that there is no sociality without the violence of a splitting subjectivity in "Women's Time," *New Maladies of the Soul* (New York: Columbia, 1995), 201-25.

Marriott contemplates the case of a four-year-old black girl who demonstrates signs of alienation and self-loathing in the last chapter of his book *Haunted Life: Visual Culture and Black Modernity*, "Bonding Over Phobia." The case was originally documented by Erik H. Erikson in "A Memorandum on Identity and Negro Youth," who describes the little girl's habit of standing in front of the mirror at school and scrubbing her skin with soap.<sup>32</sup> When diverted by her teacher the girl began to scrub the mirror. Eventually she was directed to paint instead. At first the girl filled sheets of paper with brown and black colors. The incident concluded with the girl bringing a "really *good* picture" to the teacher. Upon first glance the teacher only saw a blank sheet of paper but when she looked closer she could see that the girl had covered the entire paper with white paint.<sup>33</sup> Marriott characterizes the girl's obsessive concern with her mirror image as a compulsion that is indicative of her psychological alienation. He notes, "The girl's fantasy is not simply an imaginary or delusionary identification with whiteness: it represents the intrusion, into her unconscious, of phobias

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<sup>32</sup> Such an action recalls the racist advertisements created by Pears Soap during the Victorian era wherein soap "purifies" the skin of the black subject. Anne McClintock, "Soft-Soaping Empire Commodity Racism and Imperial Advertising," *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (New York: Routledge, 1995) 129.

<sup>33</sup> Erik H. Erikson, "A Memorandum on Identity and Negro Youth" in *A Way of Looking At Things: Selected Papers from 1930-1980*, ed. Stephen Schlein (New York: W.W. Norton, 1989), 648; David Marriott, "Bonding Over Phobia" *Haunted Life: Visual Culture and Black Modernity* (New Brunswick: Rutgers, 2007) 209.

which racist cultures project onto the bodies of black people.”<sup>34</sup> Marriott’s analysis of Erikson’s case study demonstrates that cultural alienation often prevents self-love from fully forming in young black children. Instead the child experiences rejection, psychic splitting, and emotional trauma.<sup>35</sup> Freud and Lacan assume that self-love is an inherent instinct that needs to be curbed in order to prevent secondary narcissism or excessive self-love. This may be true for the unmarked subject, whose sense of self-worth is not degraded by historical or contemporary visualizations of whiteness as inherently dirty or of masculinity as inherently vain. For the subject who will be encouraged to meet unreachable, white standards of beauty, whose sense of self-worth will be measured by their ability to adhere to these standards, and whose relationship with the mirror will be linked to their ability to diagnose and erase superficial “flaws” in their appearance that are contingent upon their ethnicity, maintaining self-love may be an ongoing battle. Instead their transition from primary narcissism to secondary narcissism is fraught. Due to marginalization that is dependent upon their subjectivity, rather than developing into egoists, hegemonic society encourages them to veer in the opposite direction, where the mirror awaits them as site for the reinforcement shame. To categorize an individual’s interest in oneself as inherently vain or narcissistic, without

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<sup>34</sup> David Marriott, "Bonding Over Phobia" *Haunted Life: Visual Culture and Black Modernity* (New Brunswick: Rutgers, 2007) 213.

<sup>35</sup>*Ibid.*

considering their subjectivity, is to ignore the existence of privilege in all its forms.

Individuals whose subjectivities stray from that of the unmarked hegemonic subject—whose bodies are othered by normative ways of knowing and being such as heteropatriarchy and white supremacy—may find themselves unable to face their reflections without shame, an issue that I will discuss in the third chapter of this thesis, *Narcissister and the Negation of Shame*. With the historically cautionary tale of Narcissus informing our collective unconscious, it may seem dangerous for oppressed subjects to return to the mirror in the hopes of recovering their fragmented self. Indeed, Western culture’s visual definition of vanity would have us believe that artistic engagement with the reflected image is an expression of self-absorption and artworks that employ the symbolic use of the mirror serve as visual evidence of the subject’s narcissism. Our ability to distinguish between imagery that is self-reflective and imagery that is egotistical is dulled by the pollution of our psyche with false visuals of feminine vanity. In her essay on Hannah Wilke’s performance art, titled “The Rhetoric of the Pose: Hannah Wilke and the Radical Narcissism of Feminist Body Art,” Amelia Jones quotes feminist art critic Lucy Lippard who notes:

Men can use beautiful, sexy women as neutral objects or surfaces, but when women use their own faces and bodies, they are immediately accused of narcissism...Because women are considered sex objects, it is taken for granted that any woman who presents her body in public is

doing so because she thinks she is beautiful. She is a narcissist, and Acconci, with his less romantic image and pimply back, is an artist.<sup>36</sup>

Lippard is only speaking of women whose physical appearance adheres in some way to conventional standards of beauty. However one can imagine that a woman who is found 'lacking' in her beauty and uses her own body in her artwork would be met with disdain and perhaps be classified as delusional as well as narcissistic. In comparison, Vito Acconci's body is neutral because he is straight, white, and male. His level of attractiveness is rarely, if ever, a factor in the criticism of his artwork.

We look to the mirror just as we look to the faces of others for recognition. However, the mirror provides the viewer with the opportunity to recognize their potential outside of the judgment of others. Rather than dodge the mirror, photographer Carrie Mae Weems and performance artist Narcissister work to polish its surface, which has been dulled by years of false imagery, until the mirror becomes a pristine tool with which to confront and deflect oppressive stereotypes. In order to gain access to a visual terrain beyond their restricted bounds, these artists invoke an oppositional gaze as they stare long and hard into the depths of the mirror. They reference the mirror in its literal form but it also appears in their work metaphorically, through the visual doubling of the artist's body or through the implied reflective quality of the gaze of the camera.

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<sup>36</sup> Amelia Jones, "The Rhetoric of the Pose: Hannah Wilke and the Radical Narcissism of Feminist Body Art," *Body Art/Performing the Subject* (Minneapolis, 1998), 175.

Confronting rather than avoiding criticisms that strive to restrict their artistic aspirations, these artists perform a kind of radical self-love that is in dialogue with false constructions of vanity and secondary narcissism.

In her book *Body Art, Performing the Subject* Amelia Jones identifies “radical narcissism” as a tool that can be adopted by feminist performance artists as a way to expose fictitious universalities. According to Jones, when the body in question is visibly female, non-white, obviously queer, or adopts any other physical characteristics that distinguishes itself from the normative straight white male subject “the hidden logic of exclusionism underlying modernist art history and criticism is exposed.”<sup>37</sup> She notes that the more particularized the body, and the more narcissistically it behaves, the more it challenges the normativity that is built into the modernist model of art criticism that insists upon the male artist’s transcendence of his body through creative production. Transcendence of one’s subjectivity is not possible for artists whose bodies are identified first and foremost as non-male. In the fourth chapter of her book, Jones points to Hannah Wilke as an example of a feminist artist who recognizes that her body/self is already not her own within patriarchal culture, that transcendence is inaccessible and undesirable to her. Wilke performs her femininity in relationship to these societal conventions. By exposing and subverting stereotypical codes of feminine display within the Western canon,

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<sup>37</sup> Amelia Jones, “The Rhetoric of the Pose: Hannah Wilke and the Radical Narcissism of Feminist Body Art,” *Body Art/Performing the Subject* (Minneapolis, 1998), 8.

Jones notes that Wilke was able to increase her notoriety and her desirability in an art world that was primarily dominated by white men.<sup>38</sup> Without depreciating Wilke's significant contribution to the development of feminist body art and her deconstruction of feminine vanity, it is important to acknowledge that Wilke's whiteness allowed her to gain traction within an art world that is inherently patriarchal and racist. If "woman" is always the other in comparison to men, than women of color, queer women, and non-binary people of color experience a form of otherness that is exponential, a complicated, intersectional state.

Historical depictions of vanity in Western Art intrinsically tie femininity to whiteness. Portrayals of vanity and narcissism such as Peter Paul Rubens's *Venus Before a Mirror* (1614-15) [Figure 1], Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres's *The Turkish Bath* (1862-63), and Édouard Manet's *Olympia* (1863) [Figure 2], simultaneously privilege and objectify white femininity as they dehumanize and objectify black or brown<sup>39</sup> femininity. This is particularly important as we

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<sup>38</sup> "Just as Acconci, in his oscillation between base abjection and flirtation with transcendence, both critiqued and got mileage out of masculinity's claim to artistic authority, so Wilke both exposes and makes use of the conventional codes of feminine display to increase her notoriety (and her desirability) in the male-dominated art world," Amelia Jones, "The Rhetoric of the Pose: Hannah Wilke and the Radical Narcissism of Feminist Body Art," *Body Art/Performing the Subject* (Minneapolis, 1998), 155.

<sup>39</sup> Emblematic of orientalism, Ingres's *The Turkish Bath* (1862-63), stereotypes and dehumanizes the brown bodies of Middle Eastern women as well as African women. Ingres himself never traveled to Africa or the Middle East yet his depictions of women in the harem helped to construct the Western image of "oriental" lifestyle during this time period.

consider the way in which otherness is enforced upon artists who are not white, like Carrie Mae Weems and Narcissister. In her essay “Olympia’s Maid: Reclaiming Black Female Subjectivity,” artist Lorraine O’Grady carefully deconstructs Western notions of femininity. She states:

A kaleidoscope of not-white females, Asian, Native American, and African, have played distinct parts in the West’s theatre of sexual hierarchy. But it is the African female who, by virtue of color and feature and the extreme metaphors of enslavement, is at the outermost reaches of “otherness.” Thus she subsumes all the roles of the non-white body.<sup>40</sup>

Colorism is deeply entrenched in Western standards of beauty and is blatantly visible in historical depictions of feminine vanity, such as the previously mentioned allegorical painting by Rubens, *Venus Before a Mirror*. A brief analysis of Rubens’s painting demonstrates that the symbolism evoked in paintings such as these stand to impact the viewer differently based on their subjectivity. There are three figures in this painting, two of which are gathered around Venus who is in a state of undress. Venus sits on top of a piece of crimson drapery with her backside facing us. The painting is cropped closely just below her left thigh and a whisper of sheer cloth emphasizes, rather than conceals, her nude buttocks. A jeweled cuff on her upper left arm and a delicate pearl earring dangling from her left ear similarly highlight the nakedness of the figure’s robust flesh. On her left, a winged cupid holds a heavily framed octagonal mirror high above his head.

The focal point of the painting is Venus’s reflection in this mirror, which is not in

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<sup>40</sup> Lorriane O’Grady, “Olympia’s Maid: Reclaiming Black Female Subjectivity,” *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader*. Ed. Amelia Jones (London: Routledge, 2003), 208.

keeping with the figure's body in front of it. The frontal positioning of this reflected image is incongruent with the angled position of Venus's body. The otherwise unnaturally frontal reflection of the golden haired beauty allows Venus's reflection to smile out from the mirror directly at the viewer approvingly with soft eyes. The invitation of her gaze and the sumptuousness of her pink flesh are set off by her flowing blond hair. Venus's length of hair is held back by a figure on her right, who is circumscribed to a shadowy corner of the painting; Nearly consumed by the expanse of shimmering hair, the black woman assumes the role of Venus's servant. Her dark skin is crudely modeled in comparison to the carefully rendered flesh of Venus. She gazes at Venus's reflection, appearing to be wearing a mournful expression of forced admiration.

Like most artists of the seventeenth century, Rubens envisioned Venus, the goddess of love who was renowned for her beauty, as a blonde, fair skinned, white woman. Images such as these were created during a time in which Western imperialism was coming into full formation. *Venus Before a Mirror* inaugurates a white standard of beauty and encourages the white female viewer to connive in her own objectification. As Lorraine O'Grady observes, "White is what woman is; not-white (and the stereotypes not-white gathers in) is what she had better not be." Artworks such as Rubens' *Venus Before a Mirror* and Édouard Manet's *Olympia* [Figure 4] juxtapose poorly executed depictions of black women with depictions of white women, which are comparatively much more

carefully rendered,<sup>41</sup> in order to emphasize the whiteness of their objects of desire. A female viewer blinded by white privilege might not recognize that this type of imagery objectifies her while *simultaneously* glorifying her whiteness. A white viewer may not even *see* the black woman in the painting due in part to their ignorance and to Rubens's strategic choice to foist her off into the darkest corner of the picture plane. However, it is unlikely that a black female viewer would ignore such an observation. We are culturally and socially conditioned to look for traces of our own subjectivity in whatever images we are consuming. The black female body has suffered omission, hyper-exposure<sup>42</sup>, and, in the case of Rubens's painting, is often rendered in a deliberately crude or ugly fashion.

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<sup>41</sup> Contemporary critics have generated significant debate over the intentionality of Manet's sparse definition of Olympia's flesh. Most notably Clement Greenberg identified Manet as the first modernist painter for the intentional "flatness" of his paintings. Subsequently, Manet's *Olympia* has been canonized as stylistically self-aware. If Manet is so self-aware, shouldn't we consider the disparity between the careful, crisp, and precise flatness of Olympia's flesh and the clumsy brush strokes that make up the flesh of "her maid"? Clement Greenberg, "Modernist Painting." *The Collected Essays and Criticism; Volume 4: Modernism with a Vengeance, 1957-1969* (U of Chicago, 1993), 85-93.

<sup>42</sup> The primary historical example of this phenomenon is the case of Saartjie Baartman, a Khoikhoi woman from the southwestern region of Africa who was taken to Europe by Hendrik Cezar and Alexander Dunlop to be displayed in London (and later in France) as a sideshow 'freak' under titles such as the 'Egyptian Hall of Piccadilly Circus.' Her body served as a form of pornographic entertainment and pseudo-scientific 'exploration.' French zoologist George Cuvier would later use Baartman's body as evidence of the superiority of the white race, connecting the black race's biology to primates. Lisa Gail Collins points to the continued use of the moniker "Hottentot Venus," as a modern source of the denigration of Baartman's body in, "Historical Retrievals: Confronting Visual Evidence and the Imaging of Truth," In *The Art of History: African American Women Artists Engage the Past* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2002), 12-36.

All of these forces work to dehumanize black femininity. Although the subject matter of these paintings are projections of the white male painter or patron's desire, the social signifiers of white masculinity are not degraded by their choice of imagery. While the imagery undoubtedly encourages white men to view both white and black women in negative ways that are unique to their specific subjectivities, they do not encourage white men to view themselves negatively. Their unmarked privilege inoculates them from the image's poisonous symbolism. Thus the white male viewer's psychological relationship to his own image remains intact because he is not encountering a visual that directly attacks his subjectivity. Furthermore, not only does this image insulate him from criticism, it is also constructed to appeal to his assumed heterosexual desire, revealing that artworks that are created to appease heterosexual male pleasure often do so at the expense of female subjects.

## II.

### **Carrie Mae Weems: Oppositional Reflections of Radical Vanity**

The harsh binary created by colorism places whiteness and ideal feminine purity on one end of a confined beauty spectrum and blackness and eroticized carnality on the other. Therefore femininity is not a universal sign even as it is constructed in false opposition to masculine neutrality, which similarly only remains neutral when it is tied to whiteness. The contemporary artist who experiences intersectional otherness stands to be intensely alienated by the conventional functions of the mirror. While the mirror may encourage white viewers to scrutinize the lines and blemishes that form on their flesh the goal is always erasure of these flaws and restoration of their skin. Through racist and colorist cultural logics, the black viewer is encouraged not only to erase their flaws but also to erase the pigment that is inherently present in their complexion. As the caption under Carrie Mae Weems's 1986 gelatin silver print *Mirror, Mirror* [Figure 3] declares:

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!!!"<sup>43</sup>

In this photograph Weems presents us with an image of an archetypal black woman; the metaphorical body that O'Grady situates at the outermost reaches of otherness, subsuming all the roles of the non-white body. The image

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<sup>43</sup> I have chosen to maintain Weems's use of Helvetica typeface whenever I am referencing her work.

is tightly cropped around the top half of the figure's body. The figure stands with her back turned to the viewer, holding a dark wooden picture frame, which symbolizes a framed mirror. On the other side of this symbolic mirror, a lighter complected version of the same woman peeks through a layer of gauzy white tulle that has been ripped in the middle as if to suggest broken glass. The specter in the mirror holds a starburst-shaped object up to the ripped layer of tulle. This glittery ornament conjures up the burst of light that might erupt from a magic wand, although no wand is in sight, or perhaps a flash of sparkling glass as the mirror is shattered due to the intensity of this confrontation. The lighter complected woman stares out at the black woman, lips slightly parted, eyes fixed, brow set in an aloof, yet scrupulous expression. The black woman, however, does not meet her gaze.

Even as Weems pairs this image with aggressive, chastising text that references the children's fairytale, Snow White, she deflects any notion of self-loathing that the viewer might hastily project onto the archetypal black female subject. Weems effectively inverts Rubens's composition in *Venus Before a Mirror*, as she confines the light skinned apparition in the mirror to the foggy middle ground of the photograph; whereas the upper half of the black woman's body foregrounds the picture plane. Weems's archetypal black woman does not gaze wistfully at a fair-haired fantasy of white supremacist patriarchy. The black woman refuses to even look at the diluted specter in the mirror. This washed out apparition pales in comparison to the beauty of the dark skinned woman who

holds the mirror. Even as the beauty of the black woman is denied by the admonishing text, the figure's authority within the picture plane simultaneously affirms it. As photographic historian Deborah Willis observes in "Photographing Between the Lines: Beauty, Politics, and the Poetic Vision of Carrie Mae Weems," "Weems is clearly looking at the power of self-representation and subjectivity...The subtext to *Mirror, Mirror* is Weems's desire to show the holder of the mirror other avenues through which to recognize beauty."<sup>44</sup>

The combined effect of Weems's use of biting text and self-reflexive visuals exposes the racist nature of the fairytale. Weems utilizes parody to criticize the prevalence of colorism within the black community.<sup>45</sup> *Mirror, Mirror* is part of a series of photographs that Weems created early on in her career in which she combines text and photography, a tactic of visual expression for which she is now well known. Titling the body of work *Ain't Jokin'*, Weems examines morbidly racist humor and literary expressions that are found in iconic fairytales, novels, history books, and joke books.<sup>46</sup> Andrea Kirsh comments on

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<sup>44</sup> Deborah Willis, "Photographing Between the Lines: Beauty, Politics, and the Poetic Vision of Carrie Mae Weems, *Carrie Mae Weems: Three Decades of Photography and Video* (London: Yale University Press), 37-38.

<sup>45</sup> "The photograph is complex an openly aggressive. Elvan Zabunyan has described *Mirror, Mirror* as a 'caustic parody' of the children's fairy tale [Snow White], saying that the piece 'criticized racism within the Black community where different tones of skin color play an important role, the lightest often being the most respected.'" *Ibid*, 37; Elvan Zabunyan, *Black Is a Color: A History of African American Art* (Paris: Editions Dis Voir, 2005), 206.

<sup>46</sup> Deborah Willis, "Photographing Between the Lines: Beauty, Politics, and the Poetic Vision of Carrie Mae Weems," *Carrie Mae Weems: Three Decades of Photography and Video* (London: Yale University Press), 37.

the divisive quality of the series in her essay “Carrie Mae Weems: Issues in Black, White and Color”:

One might say there is something here to offend everyone—everyone, that is, but the unregenerate racist. This work has a demonstrated capacity to upset both black and liberal white audiences. That discomfort is surely one measure of its importance.

The photographs in this series force the viewer to confront how deeply racial prejudice pervades the American psyche, reminding us that fictions become ‘truth’ through repetition.<sup>47</sup> *Mirror, Mirror* reveals the inherent racism embedded in Anglo-European fairytales like Snow White. If the destructive nature of this fairytale refuses to allow any diversity within the standard of beauty that it upholds, there is little chance for a black reader to derive a positive self-image from its narrative.<sup>48</sup> This fairytale, which many Westerners are exposed to during their childhood, provides female children with a glimpse at their expected relationship to the mirror: as a comparative tool used to measure their beauty against that of other women. In *Mirror, Mirror* Weems reveals that the black female subject does not have to be complicit in her subjugation by adhering to colorism. In doing so, Weems metaphorically shatters the historical mirror that has been symbolically coded as an object that is reserved for the cultivation of white feminine vanity.

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<sup>47</sup> Susan Fisher Sterling, “Photographs and Texts in the Work of Carrie Mae Weems,” *Carrie Mae Weems* (Washington, D.C., 1993), 35.

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

The visuals that Weems has constructed in *Mirror, Mirror* insist that the beauty of the dark skinned black woman is not dull in comparison to the lighter complected apparition that the chiding mirror would have her desire. In addition, Weems does not overly eroticize her subject. By closely cropping the picture and positioning the model with her back to the viewer, Weems's refuses to cater to the prying eyes of the viewer. Traditionally, stereotypical images of black women have either rendered their bodies brutally exposed (see Saartjie Baartman in footnote 41) or desexualized to the point of dehumanization (as in the Mammy caricature). Weems strikes a careful balance that is rarely found within art or visual culture between these two extremes. Her archetypal creation of black femininity is *not* devoid of sexuality. The figure wears what appears to be a thin-strapped slip that reveals a significant amount of the figure's upper back. It is a minimal, light colored garment that flatters the figure's dark skin. The figure's hair is styled into a feathered wave, she wears a diamond stud in her ear, and a ring is just barely visible on her right hand, which holds the mirror frame. A hint of makeup is detectable in the curl of her eyelashes, the soft contour of eye shadow that flicks up at the corner of her right eye, and the trace of sheen on her lips. This is not an image of a woman who takes no pride in her appearance. Instead it is more likely an image of a woman whose sense of pride is diminished by the systemic racism that is reflected back to her within historical and contemporary media and in the glances of others as she moves through daily life. As John Berger notes in the second episode of the BBC

television series “Ways of Seeing,” which inspired the previously referenced text on visual culture by the same name:

Women constantly meet glances, which act like mirrors, reminding them of how they look or how they should look. Behind every glance is a judgment. Sometimes the glance they meet is their own, reflected back from a real mirror.<sup>49</sup>

Berger’s discourse only concerns depictions of white femininity within the Western tradition. His analysis of the category of ‘the nude’ provides significant insight into the functional relationship that white women are encouraged to have with the mirror as he makes an important distinction between the judgment of others and the mirror itself. For black women the weight of societal judgment is doubly felt across the lines of race and gender, heightening the pressure between the construction of self and the mirror.

Why would Weems construct a positive image of black femininity, only to doom her to hold up a mirror that oppresses her? Weems presents us with an image of a mirror that is perhaps more readily expected by the audience. Mirrors follow oppressed individuals everywhere, yet such individuals are often considered vain or narcissistic for looking into them. This begs the question as to why Weems wouldn’t simply give the audience an empowered image of a confident black woman looking into a mirror of her own making? Presenting the viewer with a positive image of black femininity alone does not address the

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<sup>49</sup> John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, television series, produced by Mike Dibb (British Broadcasting Corporation, 1972).

psychological trauma that is unique to her subjectivity. Nor would it address the negative relationship that black women are *expected* to have with the mirror. Indeed the expectation of vanity is not as firmly associated with black femininity as white femininity under the conditions of Western colonialism. Colorism attempts to condition black women to believe that they needn't look to the mirror to affirm and preserve their beauty because black beauty does not exist within white supremacy. Weems's *Mirror Mirror* seems to suggest that before a black female spectator can find depth within the practice of mirror gazing she must confront the false relationship that she has been prescribed to have with the mirror. Weems is not writing off mirror gazing by creating an image of black femininity that refuses to engage in the self-loathing that is encouraged by white supremacy. Instead she is capturing a moment of confrontation between the divided self, while recognizing that oppressive mirrors can be defied. This is not to suggest that an oppressed subject cannot construct new mirrors for themselves once they have articulated that many mirrors strive to oppress them. I return once again to Lorriane O'Grady's discourse in "Olympia's Maid: Reclaiming Black Female Subjectivity":

To name ourselves rather than be named we must first see ourselves. For some of us this will not be easy. So long unmirrored in our true selves, we may have forgotten how we look. [...] The idea bears repeating: self-expression is not a stage that can be bypassed. It is a discrete moment that must precede or occur simultaneously with the deconstructive act.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Lorriane O'Grady, "Olympia's Maid: Reclaiming Black Female Subjectivity," *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader*. Ed. Amelia Jones (London: Routledge, 2003), 209.

In the 1997 photographic series, *Not Manet's Type* [Figure 4], Weems addresses her relationship to the art historical canon that glorifies white male "genius." As an African American woman Weems's perspective is negated by her gender and her race within the context of the Western canon.<sup>51</sup> This series of photographs not only demonstrates how inclusion in the form of degrading imagery or complete omission from the canon plagues the psyche of the marginalized contemporary artist, it also questions the assumptions that the viewer has about the barrier between artist and model, as Weems uses her own body in this series.

Once again Weems demonstrates her insightful wit as she allows the viewer an intimate glimpse into the private space of a bedroom through the reflection of a vanity mirror. The series consists of five images, paired with five pieces of text in which Weems contemplates her place within the canon as she simultaneously assumes the role of subject, muse, and artist. The art deco style vanity mirror remains a constant across all five photographs, which are so compositionally similar that the subtle shifts in light, décor, and space become important markers for the shift within the subject's internal dialogue. The strikingly circular mirror, which is grounded by a set of dresser drawers, expands the picture plane as we are allowed to peer voyeuristically into Weems's psyche.

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<sup>51</sup> Kathryn E. Delmez, plate commentary, *Carrie Mae Weems: Three Decades of Photography and Video* (London: Yale University Press), 160.

The series begins with an image of Weems standing with her back turned to the viewer. She wears a thin-strapped nightgown not unlike the one worn by the model in *Mirror, Mirror*, however Weems's gown is black and, unlike *Mirror, Mirror*, we are able to see Weems's surroundings. She leans forward against the frame of a full sized bed. The text below the image corresponds to her posture, stating:

STANDING ON SHAKEY GROUND  
I POSED MYSELF FOR CRITICAL STUDY  
BUT WAS NO LONGER CERTAIN  
OF THE QUESTIONS TO ASK

It is no mistake that Weems begins the contemplative dialogue of this series by pairing this text with an image of herself with her back already turned to the mirror/viewer. Indeed this series picks up where *Mirror, Mirror* left off as Weems has already demonstrated that the mirror's function has been corrupted by colorism. Weems recognizes that she no longer has any questions to ask of the art historical canon. The subsequent four combinations of text and image provide the viewer with definitive observations made by Weems of the representations of her subjectivity (or lack thereof) within Western art. In the second image she is naked, standing with her back straighter, her hands now lightly resting on the bedframe as she observes:

IT WAS CLEAR I WAS NOT MANET'S TYPE  
PICASSO - WHO HAD A WAY WITH WOMEN -  
ONLY USED ME & DUCHAMP NEVER  
EVEN CONSIDERED ME

This is perhaps the most provocative passage of text from the series, after which the piece is named. Here Weems scrutinizes artists that are emphasized within the art historical cannon for their innovations within modern art and praised for their “genius”: Édouard Manet, Pablo Picasso, and Marcel Duchamp. Weems critiques these artists for their omission or outright debasement of black femininity in their artworks. A great deal of critical commentary has been generated around Manet’s depiction of Olympia since its debut in the Paris Salon in 1865, which resulted in a controversial uproar due in part to its style and its content. Although there has been interest in recovering information about the model Manet used for his reimagining of Olympia as a modern prostitute, Victorine Meurent, the second model in his painting often goes completely overlooked.<sup>52</sup> Known simply by her first name, to those who have cared to ask, Laura’s function in this painting is to sexualize Victorine and to provide literal and metaphorical contrast to her whiteness. As a servant she reinforces the theme of Olympia and, as a black female servant, her presence symbolically highlights Victorine’s role as a prostitute.<sup>53</sup> Although Laura’s symbolic role within the piece was certainly to heighten the scandalous sexuality that Manet was depicting, her physical appearance is modest to the point of complete desexualization. Thus Manet’s depiction of Laura epitomizes the conundrum of

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<sup>52</sup> See Eunice Lipton’s *Alias Olympia: A Woman’s Search for Manet’s Notorious Model & Her Own Desire* (New York: C. Scribner’s Sons, 1992).

<sup>53</sup> Petrine Archer, “Black is Colour: Colour is Race,” *Petrine Archer [.com] Art History, News and Reviews*, <http://www.petrinearcher.com/black-colour-colour-race>, accessed January, 2016.

black femininity within art and visual culture: the black female body has been historically transformed into a symbolic object of de-sexed sexuality. In this context, black women do not need to appear to be naked or nude in order for them to be read as symbolically sexual.<sup>54</sup> Yet Laura will never be the object of desire in Manet's painting. She will merely serve as an accessory to Olympia's deviant sexuality, a crude afterthought like the black cat at Victorine's feet. The text that Weems mobilizes calls out the superficiality of such a depiction. "It was clear that I was not Manet's type." She cuts through the hyperbolic discourse that canonizes Manet as the father of modernism, as she assesses *Olympia* for what it really is: an expression of Manet's racist, heterosexual desire.

BUT IT COULD HAVE BEEN WORSE  
IMAGINE MY FATE HAD  
DE KOONING GOTTEN  
HOLD OF ME

No longer using the bed frame for strength, Weems's mirror image now appears in the left corner of the vanity mirror. Only the top half of her body is visible. She sits at the foot of the bed in an introspective pose, her left elbow

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<sup>54</sup> Lisa Gail Collin's discusses this phenomenon in the third chapter of *The Art of History*, she states, "Laura's presence in *Olympia* draws from and continues the visual economy of black erotic servitude at the same time that it expands this economy by linking the figure of the sexualized black female servant with the figure of the sexualized white female prostitute [...] The painting's coupling of these two figures evokes the fear that both these bodies elicited in members of their immediate audience: the fear of corruption and disease due to unbridled female sexuality. Manet's painting signals that the black woman no longer needs to be undressed in mid-nineteenth-century visual culture for her presence to signify a dangerous eroticism." "Economies of the Flesh," *The Art of History: African American Women Artists Engage the Past* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2002), 42.

against her knee beyond the frame of the mirror and her right hand resting against her face. Utilizing sarcasm Weems destabilizes the chronological passing of the baton from virile white male genius to genius, allowing the viewer to consider this chronology from the perspective of the exploited body. In this way, the series also acknowledges the damage that has been done to the white female body by artists such as de Kooning, reminding us always that this exploitation also affords white femininity a kind of visual recognition that was rarely, if ever, granted to black subjects.

In the fourth photograph Weems now sits on top of her bed, once again wearing the black negligee from the first photo in the series. Her posture is relaxed: her left leg dangles off of the side of the bed and her elbows are loose at her sides while her hands rest on the bed in front of her. Her eyes are closed, eyebrows knitted into a contemplative expression.

I KNEW, NOT FROM MEMORY,  
BUT FROM HOPE, THAT THERE WERE OTHER  
MODELS BY WHICH TO LIVE

The shift of the narrative in the text, in combination with the increasingly introspective quality of the imagery, heightens the vulnerability that Weems experiences as a subject. She invites the viewer to witness a deeply intimate moment of self-reflection. In the photograph Weems appears peaceful, meditative even, as she considers her own futurity in regards to the violent and repressive history of Western art. This is the only directly frontal image of Weems in the series and it is here that it becomes apparent that Weems denies

her audience a direct gaze in every image. This heightens the voyeuristic quality of the series and prompts the viewer to reflect upon their relationship to Weems as a subject. The text in particular encourages the viewer to consider what Weems's experience has been like navigating an art world that privileges white heterosexual masculinity, which, at best, tokenizes non-white artists. Weems implies that she did not encounter any positive imagery of black femininity within the Western canon towards which she could aspire as an artist herself. Hope becomes the driving force in her pursuit of complex, nuanced portrayals of black femininity and sexuality that defy historically toxic stereotypes. The hope that Weems refers to must be generated internally. Judging by the posture and the expression she adopts, Weems appears to be in the process of visualizing this hope for futurity.

The final image of Weems closes the circle of introspection that she has briefly allowed the viewer to witness through her private vanity mirror. Naked she lies on her bed, left arm and right leg drawn up to her chest, right arm flung over her head. Her gaze is directed up towards the ceiling indicating that her vision extends beyond her material surroundings. However her surroundings also indicate the breadth of Weems's genesis of hope. Her body is illuminated with strong light that emanates from the window behind her bed and an unseen light source in front of her, possibly from another window outside of the picture plane. Weems's left hand is closed into a fist, combined with her gaze which

willfully ignores the audience, she transforms what otherwise might be considered a submissive pose into one that defies simplistic categorization.

I TOOK A TIP FROM FRIDA  
WHO FROM HER BED PAINTED INCESSANTLY - BEAUTIFULLY  
WHILE DIEGO SCALED THE SCAFFOLDS  
TO THE TOP OF THE WORLD

Perhaps Weems references the surrealist painter, Frida Kahlo because she stands out as one of the only female artists of color working primarily with self-reflective imagery that has been incorporated into the Western art historical canon. Kahlo's canonization is also unique because her fame and influence within contemporary society now exceeds that of her husband Diego Rivera, who received more acclaim during their lives as artists.<sup>55</sup> Weems is clearly remarking on the contrast between their process and style. Kahlo was known for her intimate, small-scale self-portraits, Diego for his expansive murals. Together they are remembered as an artistic couple with a passionate, yet volatile, relationship. Weems suggests that the introspection that Kahlo conducted from her bedroom eclipsed that of Diego, although he created large-scale iconic murals and was able to travel more than Kahlo. Never allowing the confines of her medical condition to limit her artistic vision, Kahlo "from her bed painted

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<sup>55</sup> In fact Frida Kahlo did not achieve major popularity until well after her death in 1954. Peter Wollen and Laura Mulvey helped introduce Kahlo to the Western art world through the organization of the first retrospective of Kahlo's work outside of Mexico at Whitechapel Gallery in London in May of 1982. In the 90s Kahlo reached cult status. Weems's choice to reference Kahlo in *Not Manet's Type* is indicative of her transformation from the little known wife of Diego Rivera to one of the most well known Mexican artists of her time. Peter Wollen, "Fridamania." Paris/Manhattan: Writings on Art. London: Verso, 2004.

incessantly—beautifully.” Kahlo lived with the physical effects of trauma, yet rather than avoiding this subject she explored its impact on her psyche through her artwork. Weems engages in a similar form of reflexivity in her art practice as she addresses the trauma that has been inflicted upon black subjects throughout time. This legacy of trauma does not inhibit Weems from developing a different model of black feminine resistance. Like Kahlo, she becomes her own model and creator.<sup>56</sup> In this final image Weems presents the viewer with an image of a black female subject who is her own muse, who is vulnerable yet autonomous. Weems encourages us to consider the lack of images of black women depicted in a moment of leisurely self-reflection in art and visual culture.

The inclusion of the mirror in this series is crucial, as it reminds the viewer that they are being allowed to witness Weems’s self-reflection, that they are the voyeur, and that this imagery was not constructed to gratify their preexisting desires. The mirror reminds them of the weight of their own eyes bearing down on the subject. Weems transforms the mirror from an instrument of oppression to a symbolic window into her psyche as she reflects upon her place within the white patriarchal canon. By employing the vanity mirror as a framing device in which her psychological images are constructed Weems redefines vanity as a form of introspection and self-knowledge that can be used

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<sup>56</sup> Hilarie M. Sheets, "Photographer and Subject Are One," *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 15 Sept. 2012.

to resist degrading stereotypes, or complete omission, of black femininity.

Weems's defiant vanity is radical.

Weems pairs various tropological mirrors with unexpectedly complex visual scenarios. It is often the deceptively simple construction of her imagery and blunt text that allows Weems to acknowledge her subjectivity by addressing the limiting stereotypes that are projected upon her and commenting beyond these limitations. The mirror is a reoccurring visual device in several of her photographic series. A simple double-sided vanity mirror appears twice in *The Kitchen Table Series* [Figures 5 and 6], a group of photographs from 1990 that investigate the domestic space where power is negotiated between women and men, friends and lovers, and parents and children.<sup>57</sup> In the first image of the series Weems sits at the head of a table before a circular, chrome, double-sided mirror. She gazes out directly at the viewer, her lips pursed into a knowing smirk, her right hand brought up to her chin in a thoughtful gesture, her fingers just visible between the top of the mirror and her bottom lip. Her left hand rests on the tabletop upon which various items are strewn about her: a bottle of whiskey, two glasses, a pack of cigarettes, a comb and a brush. A man dressed in

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<sup>57</sup> Carrie Mae Weems comments on this series during an interview with Dawoud Bey for *BOMB Magazine*, "I use my own constructed image as a vehicle for questioning ideas about the role of tradition, the nature of family, monogamy, polygamy, relationships between men and women, between women and their children, and between women and other women—underscoring the critical problems and the possible resolves. In one way or another, my work endlessly explodes the limits of tradition." Dawoud Bey, "Artists in Conversation: Carrie Mae Weems," *BOMB Magazine* — *Carrie Mae Weems*, 2009.

a dark suite and hat stands behind the seated Weems. He bends down towards her, one arm resting on the table next to her; the other disappears behind her body as he embraces her.

In an interview with prominent feminist theorist bell hooks, Carrie Mae Weems discusses her relationship to Laura Mulvey's discourse on the male gaze in "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" and her subsequent book *Visual and Other Pleasures*.<sup>58</sup> She remarks that when *Visual and Other Pleasures* was released she was also in the process of constructing *The Kitchen Table Series*. Although Mulvey's text sparked tremendous amounts of critical discourse on the politics of looking, both hooks and Weems were thoroughly aware of Mulvey's failure to address gender politics as they relate to race. hooks states, "Her piece was the catalyst for me to write my piece on black female spectators, articulating theoretically exactly what you [Weems] were doing in *The Kitchen Table Series*." The essay that hooks wrote in response to Mulvey's shortsightedness, "The Oppositional Gaze," acknowledges Mulvey's falsely universal perspective of white womanhood. hooks critiques Mulvey's discussion of the male gaze not only for her active suppression of racial recognition and her failure to consider black female spectatorship but also for leaving no room within her discourse for the development of an oppositional gaze, a gaze that critiques racist

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<sup>58</sup> bell hooks, "Talking Art With Carrie Mae Weems," *Art on My Mind: Visual Politics* (New York: New, 1995), 74-93.

phallocentrism and objectification.<sup>59</sup> hooks notes that black female spectators have had to develop looking relations that recognize the simultaneous absence and misrepresentation of black femininity within historical and contemporary culture:

Looking at films with an oppositional gaze, black women were able to critically assess the cinema's construction of white womanhood as object of phallocentric gaze and choose not to identify with either the victim or the perpetrator. Black female spectators, who refused to identify with white womanhood, who would not take on the phallocentric gaze of desire and possession, created a critical space where the binary opposition Mulvey posits of "woman as image, man as bearer of the look" was continually deconstructed.<sup>60</sup>

Although "The Oppositional Gaze" was not published until 1992 amongst a collection of essays in *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, Weems's use of the gaze in *The Kitchen Table Series* (which was completed in 1990) clearly resonates with hooks's discourse and challenges the extensive theoretical limitations of Mulvey's *Visual and Other Pleasures*.<sup>61</sup> The visual narrative that Weems constructs within *The Kitchen Table Series* presents the viewer with specific moments of psychosocial confrontation through looking. Her work

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<sup>59</sup> "Feminist film theory rooted in an ahistorical psychoanalytic framework that privileges sexual difference actively suppresses recognition of race, reenacting and mirroring the erasure of black womanhood that occurs in films, silencing any discussion of racial difference—of racialized sexual difference." bell hooks in "The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators." *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader*. Ed. Amelia Jones (London: Routledge, 2003), 112.

<sup>60</sup> bell hooks in "The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators," *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader*, Ed. Amelia Jones (London: Routledge, 2003) 112.

<sup>61</sup> hooks points out their connection during her interview with Weems, identifying her as an artist who is also a cultural critic and a theoretical peer. bell hooks, "Talking Art With Carrie Mae Weems," *Art on My Mind: Visual Politics* (New York: New, 1995), 82.

simultaneously identifies the lack of complex, humanizing representations of black subjects while she questions the distribution of power across gender lines. Through her mobilization of an oppositional gaze, Weems moves beyond the stagnant victimization of Mulvey's discourse. Recognition of victimization is necessary, but to remain fixed within this categorization perpetuates one's marginalization.

As one would expect, Weems is quite aware of her innovative development of the gaze in this series, "All the pieces in *The Kitchen Table Series* highlight 'the gaze,' particularly the piece where the woman is sitting with a man leaning against her, his head buried in her neck, a mirror placed directly in front of her, but she looks beyond that to the subject.<sup>62</sup> Weems's use of the mirror in this photograph is unprecedented; the direction of her gaze opposes the logical function of the mirror as an object for gazing, forcing the audience to reconsider any stereotypical assumptions of vanity that might arise when they are confronted with a composition that includes a mirror and a female subject. The expression that Weems wears in this photo defies the mirror that is placed before her and the audience's expectation for her to direct her gaze toward *it* and not *them*. Her gaze is not inviting and acquiescent, nor is it sedated and sultry. It is cool, sharp, and self-assured. At long last we are given a subject who asks us to consider our relationship to her autonomy. Whether or not she wields

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<sup>62</sup> bell hooks, "Talking Art With Carrie Mae Weems," *Art on My Mind: Visual Politics* (New York: New, 1995), 85.

autonomy is not in question, the question is how do we respond to an image of a woman who is resolved in the validity of her beauty, her sexuality, and her authority? In this way Weems is addressing the lack of autonomous black subjects within contemporary culture but also the absence of autonomous images of women across racial boundaries.

The double-sided mirror that Weems has inserted into this composition may not be a chastising one. Certainly a reason for its presence is to inspire a reexamination of the preexisting associations a viewer might have between mirrors and feminine vanity. The audience is denied the ability to see Weems's reflection in the mirror. The implication is that the subject can gaze into the mirror without experiencing disappointment, guilt, or shame. If she can stare bluntly at the viewer with a knowing smirk than surely she can gaze fearlessly into the mirror that sits in front of her.

The mirror makes a second appearance in the twelfth photograph of *The Kitchen Table Series*. *Untitled (Woman and daughter with makeup)* shares the same basic composition as the other photographs in the series. Weems again sits at the head of the table with the double-sided vanity mirror placed before her. Her left hand rests on the tabletop and her right hand grasps a tube of lipstick that she is in the process of carefully applying to her lips. On her left, a prepubescent girl, who looks to be about the age of eight or nine, joins her at the table. The girl has her own child-sized double-sided mirror and, like Weems, is applying lipstick. This image is much more divisive than the first photograph of

the series in which Weems is engaging with the viewer rather than the mirror. It is important to reiterate that Weems is inserting black female subjects into an intimate, yet politically charged, domestic setting in order to comment on the absence of self-possessed black subjects but also to spark questions amongst her audience that have implications for the construction of gender across the lines of race. Weems comments on the limited critique she has received in regards to the intersectional nature of her work during her interview with hooks, stating:

Historically, its been absolutely impossible for the vast majority of critics, of white audiences, and even black audiences to come to the work and not first and foremost fixate only on the blackness of the images. As soon as blackness becomes the all-important sign, audiences assume that the images are addressing victimization.<sup>63</sup>

Subjectivity is crucial in our consideration of this photograph. This particular image of woman and child, woman and mirror, and child and mirror invites us to ask questions pertaining to looking relations, race, and gendercodes. It does not provide simple answers to the complex state of intersectionality that Weems is encouraging the viewer to contemplate. Overlooking the role that race plays in the deconstruction of the signs and signifiers within this photograph, this image might simply appear as the indoctrination of a girlchild into normative femininity. This is owed to the homosocial process by which femininity is regularly passed down from mother to child, a process that routinely goes unnamed and unchecked within hegemonic society—but works to reproduce

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<sup>63</sup> bell hooks, "Talking Art With Carrie Mae Weems," *Art on My Mind: Visual Politics* (New York: New, 1995), 78-9.

normative gender and sexual identities. G. Roger Denson addresses the process by which gender codes are disseminated within homosocial bonding in his seven part series for the Huffington Post's Arts and Culture section titled "XX Chromosomal: Women Artists Cross The Homosocial Divide." In part three of this series Denson identifies the significance of the negotiation between mother and daughter in *The Kitchen Table Series*:

In her photographs of a young daughter mimicking her mother in the act of applying make-up or in learning and writing down lessons from a book, Weems places the enculturation of women's codes front and center of the photographic tableaux to depict the very processes that most women undergo as girls and which they, in their turn, will imbue to the next generation of women-in-formation.<sup>64</sup>

He goes on to state that through Weems's construction of the "lipstick-lesson scene" she is explicitly calling attention to the process by which girls compose themselves homosocially prior to their experience of the male gaze. While Denson's argument that girls mimic the femininity that they see in their familial environment and often look to appease their mothers, sisters, or girlfriends before they shift their focus towards appealing to heteronormative male desire is valid, he lacks intersectionality in his assessment of Weems's work.<sup>65</sup> Denson's

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<sup>64</sup> G. Roger Denson, "Women's Art of Renewal: Carrie Mae Weems, Vanessa Beecroft, Sharon Lockhart, Catherine Opie and Lisa Yuskavage," *The Huffington Post* (TheHuffingtonPost.com, August 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2011).

<sup>65</sup> I would be remiss if I did not note that, in the same article, Denson also provides his reader with a superficial, racially insensitive, read of Vanessa Beecroft's 2009 performance in Milan referencing Leonardo da Vinci's *Last Supper* in which she staged a dinner for twenty African-immigrants, patronizingly dressed in black suits and white shirts yet left shoeless "as a reminder of their origins." The men were served chicken and brown bread on a

cursorily read of Weems's presentation of gendercoding reveals the intensity of the gendered commentary that is at play in *Untitled (Woman and daughter with makeup)*. However the role of gendered traditions within the familial structure must be considered with an awareness of the historical violence that has been done to the black female body. Deborah Willis offers us a much more insightful description of this piece:

In *Untitled (Woman and daughter with makeup)*, Weems instills a sense of maternal pride in an intimate moment as both look into the mirror, coming face to face with enhancing their beauty by putting on lipstick. It is a moment seldom experienced in public, but one observed closely as one imitates the other. [...] Is the prepubescent child wearing barrettes and a ponytail in *Untitled (Woman with daughter and makeup)* ready for the experience? Perhaps Weems sees this as a magical moment for the young girl as she explores ideas of beauty. Or is this an intervention?<sup>66</sup>

Willis recognizes the insularity of the domestic space that mother and child occupy and leaves potential for empowerment within this moment of mimesis. Outside of the conceivable security provided by their immediate domestic surroundings, the world actively works to dismiss the beauty of the mother and child in this photograph, primarily as a result of unattainable white standards of beauty. Rather than prescribing a singular and fixed interpretation of this piece, Willis encourages us to consider multiple interpretations, in doing so she points out its potential divisiveness. Like all of the photographs in *The Kitchen Table*

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glass table with no utensils of any kind. His entire article lacks any criticality or sensitivity in regards to race.

<sup>66</sup> Deborah Willis, "Photographing Between the Lines: Beauty, Politics, and the Poetic Vision of Carrie Mae Weems," *Carrie Mae Weems: Three Decades of Photography and Video* (London: Yale University Press), 36.

*Series*, Weems is presenting us with an image of familial intimacy that is so rarely found within our visual culture that we may not know what to do with it. Could a contemporary vanity mirror such as this one, whose magnifying properties we associate with extreme scrutiny of physical flaws, be a site for self-care and self-discovery? Once again Weems denies the audience a glimpse of the reflection that the woman and her daughter are viewing as they apply their makeup. This moment of self-reflection and self-care is for the subjects, not the audience. This is radical vanity. Perhaps the mother in this photograph is not perpetuating a legacy of normative femininity but is instead teaching her daughter how to find pleasure in modifying her self-image. *Untitled (Woman and daughter with makeup)* also reveals how historically rare it is that popular visual culture or art produces an image of a black woman taking care of herself, and teaching her own child to take care of herself, rather than serving the needs of a supine white woman or doting on said woman's children so that her employer may have leisurely time away from her domestic responsibilities.

Carrie Mae Weems revisits the mirror throughout her many bodies of work; each time she explodes the mirror's historical coding as an object of feminine vanity and shifts its symbolic function from a tool for diagnosis of physical flaws to a window for self-reflection. In this way she inaugurates a powerful form of radical vanity, not dissimilar from Amelia Jones's description of radical narcissism. Weems's radical vanity is unique to her black female subjectivity and her insistence on self-imaging and mirror gazing reveals the

way race and class have determined accessibility to conventional definitions of feminine beauty. However, Weems's recoding of feminine vanity in relationship to her subjectivity, radical though it may be, does not enter into the realm of radically self-indulgent narcissism.

### III.

#### **Narcissister: Radical Narcissism and the Negation of Shame**

The performance artist, Narcissister, demonstrates that mirroring can also occur through the doubling of the self. Although she often dismantles similar stereotypes as Carrie Mae Weems, her approach is decidedly riskier. Narcissister infuses spectacle, seduction, and pornographic imagery into her complex commentary on racial and gendered stereotypes. If Weems's work has the potential to be divisive, Narcissister's work is polarizing.

*Every Woman* is perhaps Narcissister's most well-known performance piece [Figure 7]. Existing both in carefully choreographed video form and in the form of live performance, Narcissister's decisive and controlled movements demonstrate her virtuosity as a dancer formerly trained by Alvin Ailey Dance Company. *Every Woman*, the video, begins with a shot of scarlet curtains embellished with silver trim and black tasseled ropes. Slowly the curtains part, revealing a nude woman with her back turned away from the camera, wearing a giant wig styled in an afro, hustling back and forth to the first few bars of Chaka Khan's "Everywoman." As the curtains retract, a series of yellow captions appear on the screen in syncopated succession: "Narcissister. is. EVERYWOMAN."

The woman remains impossibly still as her entire body makes a slow 180 turn, as if she is standing on top of a rotating platform. Once her body is turned toward the camera, the face of the woman remains concealed behind a plastic mask. The mask is barely a shade darker than the woman's caramel colored skin.

She twists and turns for a few bars, waving her hands, adorned with red lace fingerless gloves and talon-like finger prosthetics with extremely long fake, painted nails, across her face. She brings her crimson claws up to her plastic visage and suddenly pops the mask off of her face only to reveal that the performer inside is wearing another mask, identical to the first save for its functional exposure of the performers mouth, which is crammed with red cloth. Slowly the performer pulls various pieces of clothing out of her mouth (a red tube-top, a gold belt, yellow hoop earrings) and dresses herself as Khan sings, "I'm every woman, its all in me, anything that you want done baby, I'll do it naturally." She pulls two gold arm cuffs out of her afro, her open-mouthed smile unnervingly blending into the sharp, inhuman features of her mask.

As she sways back and forth a harsh backlight obscures her body from the camera, a typical characteristic of disco music videos of Chaka Khan's era. Throughout the video this light source throws blinding light back onto the camera that is recording the performance, at times revealing how dirty the lens is. It is only with careful inspection from multiple viewings that one is able to guess that this affect is achieved in part with the aid of an invisible mirror that bounces light around the studio space in which she is filming.<sup>67</sup> Her hands move down to her waist, she rests her hands on her hips, and then she reaches a claw between her legs as she pulls one red stocking out from her vagina, and then a second. After she slowly puts on the stockings, she reaches into her afro again

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<sup>67</sup> This glare is visible in figure 7.

and pulls out two pairs of yellow, peep toe heels. She sinks down to the floor and, laying on her side, puts on the spike heels. In one swift motion, she swivels into a sitting posture and spreads her legs wide open, giving us full view of her merkin capped vagina, pulling out a white and black striped spandex mini skirt. After she slowly puts the skirt on, she stands and hikes up the skirt in the back; as we wonder what more she could possibly pull from her body. Once again her still body rotates as if on a platform. As she rotates, she pulls a piece of fabric out from behind her. As her buttock comes into full view, we see that she is pulling the fabric not from her vagina, but, seemingly, from her rectum. She frees the multicolored fabric and brings it up to her shoulders, wrapping it around her neck, finally revealing its utilitarian function as a scarf. She pulls back down her skirt, running her frightening hands over her lithe body. As she reaches her breasts she stops, making a questioning gesture with her arms as if she has forgotten something. She then retrieves a patent yellow handbag from her afro. She opens the handbag and procures a pair of bulbous sunglasses. She puts them on, finally completing her ensemble. As the video draws to a close, Narcissister dances and playfully poses in her outfit, rotating, once again, on the invisible platform.

The name “Narcissister” itself is a double entendre, combining the root “narcissus,” recalling the original Greek myth of the boy who fell in love with his own reflection, with “sister,” referencing her intersectional identity as a black woman. *Every Woman* calls attention to the historical corruption of

contemporary black female sexuality as inherently ontologically licentious. Narcissister appears to us as a kitschy apparition, channeling stereotypical blaxploitation disco era nostalgia. Her athletic body is exposed, while the artist's face, as always, is obscured by her disturbing, Barbie-like mask.<sup>68</sup> Her body is already stripped bare before the camera is even on her; as if to identify the historical physical and psychological stripping of the black female body and its contemporary symbolic coding as inherently sexual.<sup>69</sup> Narcissister tempers the underlying criticism of hegemony in her work through the use of seduction. Carefully constructed props that the artist makes herself add a dose of humor to her work.<sup>70</sup> Her costumes are incredibly detailed and complex, leaving the audience wondering how she was able to fit a handbag, a pair of pumps, and a pair of gold cuffs into her afro; and even more perplexing, how *did* she pull so many things out of her vagina?

Taking a nod from the seduction that is inherent in the culture of the cabaret community, Narcissister's performances oscillate between entertaining parody and critical commentary. Her performances navigate nightclub settings, cutting edge performance art spaces, and traditional gallery spaces as she dispenses her own form of lethal seduction, what Weimar era composer

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<sup>68</sup> According to Narcissister's artist statement on her website, "The Narcissister mask is a repurposed wig display form designed in Los Angeles in 1965 by female entrepreneur Verna Doran."

<sup>69</sup> Recall Manet's use of the *desexualized* black female body as a signifier of sexual depravity in *Olympia*.

<sup>70</sup> Narcissister studied under Faith Ringgold at the University of California, where she learned that she could combine craft and politics in her artwork.

Friedrich Hollaender called the “poison cookie.”<sup>71</sup> In interviews, Narcissister confirms the crucial component humor plays in her work:

Humor can be so wonderfully subversive. The performer Vaginal Davis calls it “the sugar pill” for heavy-duty complex issues. These issues around race, eroticism, and gender are very important to me. I feel that if I explore them with humor there is much more that can be ingested by the viewer than if I was to be very heavy handed in discussing these issues.<sup>72</sup>

The audience is entranced and amazed, yet repelled and shocked as she pulls object after object out of her body. The blurred line between interior and exterior calls attention to how routinely the black female body is objectified in art and the media, it takes the repetitive removal of an almost endless amount of objects from every imaginable orifice in Narcissister’s body for us to recognize that this humanly impossible body is human. It is her use of humor, however, that has a demonstratively polarizing effect on her audience. As previously discussed, Carrie Mae Weems has used humor as a method for addressing systemic racism and sexism in her work as well. However Weems uses an altogether different vernacular. The formal qualities of Weems’s *Aint Jokin’* series—as silent, still, contemplative black and white photographs—reveal the archaic jokes as deadly serious and humorless when paired with depictions of black subjects. Narcissister uses humor, on the other had, as one tool within her

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<sup>71</sup> Shane Vogel in “Where Are We Now? Queer World Making and Cabaret Performance,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, Vol. 6, Number 1, 2000, 35.

<sup>72</sup> Narcissister, interviewed by Anna Garski, San Francisco Art Institute, October 20, 2015.

arsenal of visual seduction. It is this spectacle-rich presentation that render more serious viewers ill at ease. Indeed, one criticism of her work might be that stereotypically degrading tropes should not be toyed with in a seductive manner. However Narcissister has made it clear that she is invested in combining spectacle with criticism in order for her work to be visible and accessible to the broadest possible audience across multiple platforms. Believing that problematic tropes must be embodied from the inside out Narcissister knowingly risks reaffirming problematic imagery in her use of sexual imagery and sexual fetishism. Citing the theory of cultural critic Stuart Hall in her artist statement she notes,

Narcissister questions fetishism, particularly sexual fetishism, which is notorious in its fixing of racist and gendering stereotypes. Rather than abandon this contaminated site, Narcissister dives headlong into the muck, into the depths of the fantasy and fetish itself, to expose and deconstruct their power.<sup>73</sup>

During a heated Q&A after a live performance at the San Francisco Art Institute, Narcissister reaffirmed these sentiments when several students questioned her about the use of stereotypically racist imagery. She stated that she believes that racist and sexist imagery must be deconstructed from the inside out. "I enjoy embodying these stereotypes that could be oppressive to me. I love showing how flimsy the stereotypes are. That I can just put on a costume of this persona and I

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<sup>73</sup> "Artist Statement," *Narcissister*, accessed April 2, 2016, [www.narcissister.com/statement](http://www.narcissister.com/statement).

can just tear it away..."<sup>74</sup> Not everyone in this particular audience of art students, professors, and local community members were convinced by the ease at which a stereotypical costume could be abandoned. Costumes though they may be, many individuals are not able to strip away aspects of their physical or emotional selves that are associated with damaging stereotypes.

Professional dancer, choreographer, critical theorist of performance studies, and official dramaturg of *Narcissister*,<sup>75</sup> Ariel Osterweis justifies the artist's use of negative stereotypes in her recently published article "Public Pubic: *Narcissister*'s Performance of Race, Disavowal, and Aspiration" in *Winter* of 2015, she writes, "*Narcissister*'s oeuvre depends on the recognition of stereotypes—both our beliefs in them and our desire to dismantle their hold. Moreover, she situates us as viewers within that shameful space of perceiving the degree of truth inherent to any stereotype."<sup>76</sup> Osterweis's definition of "truth" is unclear, reminding us that we should be suspicious of empirical truth and its ability to rationalize violence. I would like to expand upon Osterweis's discourse and suggest that *Narcissister*'s embodiment, removal, and disposal of negative stereotypes encourages her viewers to consider the degree to which negative stereotypes, even the ones that they may be actively resist, remain fixed

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<sup>74</sup> *Narcissister*, performance at the San Francisco Art Institute, October 20, 2015.

<sup>75</sup> Ariel Osterweis, "Bio," *Ariel Osterweis*, February 23, 2016, <http://arielosterweis.com/bio>.

<sup>76</sup> Ariel Osterweis, "Public Pubic: *Narcissister*'s Performance of Race, Disavowal, and Aspiration," *The Drama Review*, Volume 59, Number 4, Winter 2015 (MIT Press), 104.

within their psyche as a product of embellished “truth.” The striping of embellished costumes and the circuitous reversal of striptease that is often enacted in Narcissister’s performances reminds us of the instability of truth itself.

The mediation of the gaze that is facilitated by Narcissister’s iconic mask invites an analysis of desire and empathy as they relate to viewership and looking relations. I propose a differentiation between the concepts of “looking” verses “seeing.” Often the terms are used interchangeably as if they are synonymous in their meaning. Yet it is when the distinctions between these terms are defined that proper consideration can be made as to whether a viewer is affording the object of their gaze genuine compassion. Laura Mulvey coined the phrase “to-be-looked-at-ness” in her essay *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* in order to describe how female characters were historically constructed to disrupt the flow of a film’s narrative through their coding as objects “to be looked at.” In this way, to-be-looked-at-ness describes how female protagonists exist first and foremost to be viewed as objects not as subjects. bell hooks and Carrie Mae Weems present us with examples of black women who demand to be interpreted as subjects as they cast an oppositional gaze back onto those who would deny them autonomy. hooks and Mulvey’s discourse provide the groundwork for a critical differentiation between looking and seeing. “Looking” is a simple act of authoritative gazing by those who possess greater hegemonic power than the subject that they objectify with their look. “Seeing” implies

greater insight into the integrity of the subject. Optimal seeing promotes identification with the subject. Although the term itself implies a strong emphasis on the physical act of taking in imagery, the foundational property that differentiates seeing from looking is not ocular. Seeing requires empathy.

Narcissister forces her audience to confront their desire to objectify the unclothed black female body through her refusal to disclose her identity by obscuring her face. We are made to consider our intentions in relationship to her rather than her artistic intentions in relationship to us. Narcissister seduces us with elaborate sets and physical charms, encouraging us to look at her.<sup>77</sup> As soon as our focus is captured we are forced to deepen our looking; She invites us to look and in doing so forces us to see. In an interview with *VICE* magazine in 2014 Narcissister stated:

When an artist uses their own body, face, eyes, its always going to be about their experience, how they look, how they're aging, their presentation of supreme or failed femininity or masculinity. There are certain things I can't change—my body, my skin color—but I want to comment beyond my own subjecthood on issues of race, beauty, and sexuality. Narcissister is nobody. It is a plastic mask that is only animated by the person who is wearing it. The mask becomes a mirror and it's very rare for artists to make themselves a mirror. It's so much more common that we get absorbed into them. Into their subjectivity.

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<sup>77</sup> Narcissister is well aware of the power of conventional aesthetic beauty and aims to balance its seductive properties with abjection: "The project would not have the same depth that it has if I didn't also explore the 'ugly.' I am not interested in something that is too sweet or too easily digestible or is only pretty and nothing else. I do want to call upon the ugly, or the dark side, or abject." Narcissister, interviewed by Anna Garski, San Francisco Art Institute, October 20, 2015.

The issues that arise when an artist uses their own body as a primary tool for expression is uniquely complicated for artists whose bodies are othered by the unmarked neutrality of traditional hegemonic subjects. Narcissister limits her ability to be fully deciphered by the viewer by her refusal to expose her face, and thus her true identity, to the audience. The viewer's gaze is reflected back onto itself. Rather than avoiding sexually charged forms of expression, Narcissister embodies racist and sexist stereotypes associated with her subjectivity and collapses them from the inside out. Regardless of how many costumes she may strip out of, her mask remains fixed and her identity is never publically revealed in relationship to her art. This affords her a level of security and protection and allows her to create explicit performances that challenge conventional forms of eroticism and pornography.

Feminist criticism traces the objectification and dehumanization of the female body to its violent dismemberment into parts. Often times male artists literally transformed women into objects as they visually obscure any defining characteristics of their individual personhood.<sup>78</sup> Some might interpret the concealment of the face that is behind the body that animates the Narcissister persona to be a problematic form of dehumanization. However, I suggest that Narcissister's choice to de-particularize certain parts of her body addresses the consistent dehumanization of the black female body and actually works to

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<sup>78</sup> See the work of Surrealists Max Ernst, Salvador Dalí, Man Ray, and Marcel Duchamp.

protect the identity of the artist herself. Throughout modern history the black female body has been dehumanized by white spectators, has been reconstituted as a symbol of physical and sexual excess, and has often been degraded as a spectacle of the grotesque.<sup>79</sup> Why then would Narcissister choose to depict her body in a grotesque manner?

Here, Julie Burrell's discourse in *The Lower Stratum of History: The Grotesque Comic Stereotypes of Suzan-Lori Parks and Kara Walker* offers an explanation of Parks's and Walker's work that is directly applicable to Narcissister:

Instead of merely subverting racist representation or turning them into a Utopian carnival, however, Parks and Walker mire us in the margins of the carnival [...] [Their artworks] finally insist on the negative, the abject, and the grotesque and, in doing so, force their audiences to face how their spectatorship necessarily involves them in such representations.

The combination of her plastic mask, elaborate costumes, use of prosthetics, and often the employment of a literal mannequin as a prop in her performances seem to reference the artificial construction of black feminine sexuality as excessive.<sup>80</sup> This artificiality knows no bounds as the interior self and exterior body are confused to the point of near indecipherability in *Every Woman* and many of her other performances. Narcissister also manages to balance the overall seductive quality that her svelte, athletic body elicits with disturbing

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<sup>79</sup> Refer to footnote 42 on Saartjie Baartman.

<sup>80</sup> Photographer Renee Cox employs the use of prosthetics to address similar themes in her "Hottentot" series.

sexual actions. In a gender bending performance entitled “Vaseline” Narcissister dramatically coats her vagina with a giant wad of Vaseline before inserting first a white dildo, then a switchblade knife, fully inside of her. The ease at which both the phallus and the knife penetrate her vagina is particularly disturbing. All the while the band Elastica’s post punk classic “Vaseline” sardonically chants in the background, “When you’re stuck like glue, give me some Vaseline!” The dual metaphor here seems to be that the black female body has been the site of racially fueled sexual violence, yet Narcissister wields these symbols of violence autonomously. As she painlessly penetrates herself she denies these objects their ability to harm her. The gesture is threatening to a male viewer who fears castration and the power of an autonomous pussy. In this way Narcissister also adopts a form of sexual autonomy that names and defies shame.

Shame has been historically constructed as the proper reaction to self-exposure. For many shame at the sight of their own bare face or flesh is onerous and inevitable, even for individuals whose genetics give them an advantage as they aspire towards a white standard of beauty. To take in one’s own naked image without shame is a radical act for the disempowered subject. bell hooks writes about the unique relationship that black female subjects have to shame in her essay “Naked Without Shame: A Counter-hegemonic Body Politic.” She notes that black female subjects have inherited deep-seated feelings of shame in regards to their bodies and sexualities as a result of the historical

hypersexualization and dehumanization of black women during slavery.<sup>81</sup>

Within hooks's own household exploration and appreciation of her body in any form was prohibited. She writes, "As a Black girl in a house of woman-being I wanted to see myself. I longed to cherish mirrored reflections, to understand naked brown girl flesh becoming itself." She also comments on the role that visual culture plays in the continued repression and fetishization of black female sexuality:

Every day our lives as black females are assaulted by images of ourselves constructed by the white racist/sexist imagination. The "shame" that such images evoke in individual black women has yet to be fully named. The shame will never leave us until we begin to engage in collective resistance, which means that we must challenge the ways we are currently represented. [...] Progressive black females who challenge racist and sexist representations are engaged in an ongoing struggle to reclaim our images—our naked black female bodies—so that we can construct an affirming body politic, so that we know our glory and revel in it.<sup>82</sup>

Abandonment of any expression of sexuality is not a solution, for hooks or Narcissister. The imagery that Narcissister constructs approaches dangerous territory as the racialized and gendered stereotypes that she deconstructs

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<sup>81</sup> "To justify breeding, the institutionalized sanctioning of ongoing rape of enslaved black females to produce future laborers, white supremacist patriachs had to position the black female in the cultural imagination as always "sexually suspect." To make the black female body machine, vessel, was an act of dismemberment—a mutilation that ensured this group would always be seen as less than, as not really and truly worthy of desire. Black female bodies were forced to embody the sign of sexual ruin."

bell hooks, "Naked Without Shame: A Counter-hegmonic Body Politic," *Talking Visions: Multicultural Feminism in Transnational Age*, ed. Ella Shohat (New York, NY: New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1998), 69.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*

arouse feelings of shame. Through her work, Narcissister attempts to not only name this shame, but to also challenge the racist and sexist representations of black femininity that provoke such a reaction.

In 2013 Narcissister created two sculptural pieces<sup>83</sup> that utilize mirrors for an exhibition at Envoy Enterprises [Figures 8 and 9]. These pieces consist of Narcissister's trademark mask that is suspended by two steel arms in front of a rectangular vanity sized mirror, which sits upon a small wooden table. Each sculpture is identical, save for the color of the plastic mask, one is buff white and the other is warm brown. These sculptures offer the viewer an opportunity to gaze through the mannequin masks and into their rectangular mirrors. This not only encourages the viewer to consider how Narcissister sees the audience as they view her, but it allows the viewer to stare at themselves as their identity is absorbed into the Narcissister mask for as long as they want without external judgment. These sculptures seem to offer the viewer the illusion of insight into the identity behind the Narcissister persona. However, I believe Narcissister is encouraging the viewer to consider how identity is constructed in relationship to the "other." Peggy Phelan elaborates on this conundrum in *Unmarked: The*

*Politics of Performance*:

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<sup>83</sup> Although Narcissister's work primarily takes the form of choreographed performance, whether it is live or for the camera, she has a supporting photography practice and her skills as a sculptor and seamstress aid in the creation of her sets, costuming, and props. Narcissister, interviewed by Anna Garski, San Francisco Art Institute, October 20, 2015.

Identity emerges in the failure of the body to express being fully and the failure of the signifier to convey meaning exactly. Identity is perceptible only through a relation to an other—which is to say, it is a form of both resisting and claiming the other, declaring the boundary where the self diverges from and merges with the other. In that declaration of identity and identification, there is always loss, loss of not-being the other and yet remaining dependent on the other for self-seeing, self-being.<sup>84</sup>

Amelia Jones references this passage in, *The Rhetoric of the Pose*, in relationship to Adrian Piper's 1971 performance, *Food for the Spirit*, in which Piper fasted for a prolonged period of time while reading Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*. This solitary performance was documented only by a photograph of Piper's nude reflection in a full-length mirror. Piper's alterity as both non-white and non-male, both subject and object, both not quite black and not quite white as a light skinned African American woman, dismantles the assumption that external vision provides certain knowledge of the body in representation.<sup>85</sup> Narcissister's sculptures function in a similar manner as they reveal that mirror gazing provides the contemporary subject with the opportunity to consider how their identity is constructed in relationship to their subjectivity and how subjectivity is constructed through othering. The artificiality of the sculpture's masks animate the historical artifice of racial difference. Historical and contemporary feminism has shown us that whiteness retains its unmarked

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<sup>84</sup> Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (London: Routledge, 1993), 13

<sup>85</sup> Amelia Jones, "The Rhetoric of the Pose: Hannah Wilke and the Radical Narcissism of Feminist Body Art." *Body Art/Performing the Subject* (Minneapolis, 1998), 162-164

supremacy even within political movements that are supposed to be invested in the deconstruction of false binaries. When Western contemporary feminists speak of “the female body” more often than not, they are referring to the white, cis-gendered female body as a universal site of experience. Narcissister’s sculptures remind the viewer that white and black femininity cannot be understood in isolation from one another and that the false universality of white experience is contingent upon a false construction of blackness as other. These sculptures critique racial binaries as they invite the audience to consider alternative uses of the mirror for self-reflection.

These interactive sculptures resonate with Narcissister’s ongoing community project *Narcissister is You*, in which the artist allows everyday people, regardless of gender or ethnicity, to take on the identity of Narcissister by donning her iconic mask.<sup>86</sup> The participants are asked to document themselves wearing the Narcissister mask as they do anything that feels radically narcissistic or self-loving to them.<sup>87</sup> This project demonstrates that radical narcissism assumes the form of self-care and that strategic forms of concealment can be used to combat conventional notions of shame surrounding self-imaging. When considered within the broader spectrum of Narcissister’s

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<sup>86</sup> Narcissister, “Narcissister is You,” *Narcissister*, March 9, 2016, <http://www.narcissister.com/narcissister-is-youu/>; Ariel Osterweis, “Public Pubic: Narcissister’s Performance of Race, Disavowal, and Aspiration,” *The Drama Review*, Volume 59, Number 4, Winter 2015 (MIT Press), 115.

<sup>87</sup> Narcissister, “Narcissister is You,” *Narcissister*, March 9, 2016, <http://www.narcissister.com/narcissister-is-youu/>

work, particularly in relationship to the performer's subjectivity, moments of self-care in the form of pleasure are especially poignant as they reference popular culture's profound lack of images of black women being cared for or caring for themselves.<sup>88</sup> The mask facilitates the self-care of the participants involved in the project *Narcissister is You*, just as the mirror serves as a vehicle for self-reflective creativity in the narrative of the Narcissister character. When combining live video work and performance during her visit to the San Francisco Art Institute in October of 2015, two full length video pieces, "Vaseline" and "The Basket," were prefaced by short video sequences shot from the perspective of Narcissister [Figures 10 and 11]. The audience only sees her hands, gloved in finger prosthetics with claw-like nails, as she toys with newspaper clippings and iconography that she eventually embodies in the videos that follow. This serves as "documentation" of Narcissister's creative process, all taking place on top of a reflective sheet of mylar.

Narcissister's interdisciplinary performance work is ambitious in its struggle to dismantle racist and sexist stereotypes that coincide with the subjectivity of the performer behind the project. She risks reaffirming fetishized stereotypes that already carry significant psychological weight within Western visual culture, as her costumes are seductively and grotesquely pulled apart on

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<sup>88</sup> Browning, Barbara, and Ariel Osterweis. "Dancing Social." *Theatre Survey* 53, 2012, 269–77; Ariel Osterweis, "Public Pubic: Narcissister's Performance of Race, Disavowal, and Aspiration," *The Drama Review*, Volume 59, Number 4, Winter 2015 (MIT Press), 115.

stage and in video. In a culture where hegemonic privilege often goes unchecked it becomes crucial to explicitly identify the toxic imagery that leads to negative self-imaging and feelings of shame. Narcissister demonstrates how simultaneously omnipresent and flimsy these intricate structures of domination are as she provides her audience with alternative methods of self-love through the adoption of radical narcissism. Narcissister returns to the mirror again and again as a site for the deconstruction of the self and a reconstitution of self-love, naked without shame.

### **Conclusion**

Carrie Mae Weems and Narcissister's work reveals the hypocrisy of contemporary criticisms of selfie culture that disregards the subjectivity of the selfie taker. The contemporary subject's relationship to their reflection is mediated by the degree of privilege that is granted to them in accordance to their subjectivity in Western society. Dominant hegemonic forces, such as heteropatriarchy and white supremacy, encourage marginalized subjects to establish a toxic relationship with the mirror. Rather than a means of self-cohesion, the mirror becomes a tool for the diagnosis of "flaws" that are inherent to their subjectivity. For these subjects, strident mirror gazing can become an act of defiance. Although minoritized subjects can certainly create images of themselves that appeal to, rather than challenge, dominant hegemonic forces, the contemporary selfie also provides the opportunity for the subject to capture

a mirror image of themselves that defies stereotypical categorization. The artwork of Weems and Narcissister demonstrates that marginalized subjects can regain control over their self-image through the act of such defiant mirror gazing and that negative racialized and gendered stereotypes can be contested through subversive self-representation.

Narcissister proposes a form of radical narcissism as a method of self-care for individuals who have been alienated from their bodies and isolated from their mirrored image. Physically embodying the exaggerated racialized and gendered stereotypes that pervade the contemporary psyche, Narcissister fluidly strips from costume to costume refusing to permanently bind herself to any one of these fetishized social constructions. Ever present is her mannequin mask reflecting back the viewer's expectations of a fixed identity. Weems reclaims the vanity mirror not as a site for self-criticism, but as a complex psychological terrain in which the erasure of black feminine beauty, artistic genius, and autonomy is negotiated. Her work reveals that race and class have historically dictated social access to conventional expressions of vanity. Weems comments beyond the limitations of stereotypes associated with her black female subjectivity through her uncharacteristic use of the mirror while Narcissister mires in the complexity of these limitations through reflexive imagery and costuming that exponentially multiplies the Narcissister persona. Both artists confront rather than avoid narcissism and vanity, asking us why

symbolic use of the mirror for autonomous self-representation is often interpreted as negative self-absorption.

Selfies as an image-making genre are becoming less distinct from representations of the self that are considered strictly “fine art.” More than ever they stand as a case study for the way Western contemporary society interprets mirrored images of the self as evidence of narcissism and vanity with no consideration of the individual’s subjectivity. The ongoing backlash against the selfie trend demonstrates the risk that is involved in creating self-reflexive artwork. However, close inspection of Weems and Narcissister’s artwork also reveals that there are criticisms to be made of selfie culture. Their artwork suggests that creating nuanced depictions of marginalized subjectivities is not enough. An image-maker must also interrogate the tools, signs and symbols that render marginalized subjects invisible and self-representation as excessive.



Figure 1, Peter Paul Rubens, *Venus Before a Mirror*, oil on wood, 1614-15.



Figure 2, Édouard Manet, *Olympia*, oil on canvas, 1863-1865.



**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!!!”**

Figure 3, Carrie Mae Weems, *Mirror Mirror*, silver gelatin print, 1986.

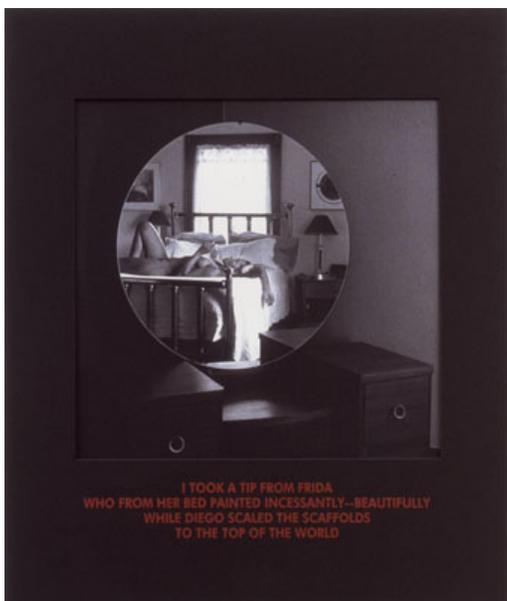
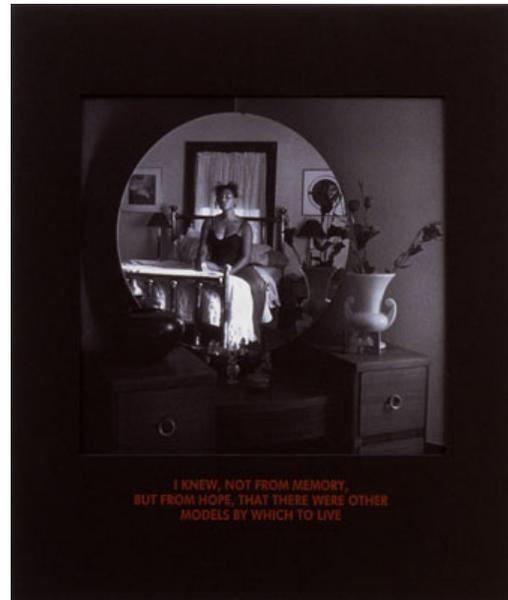
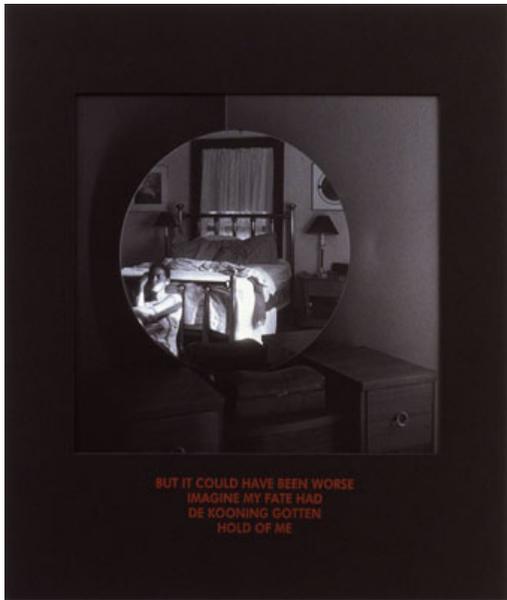
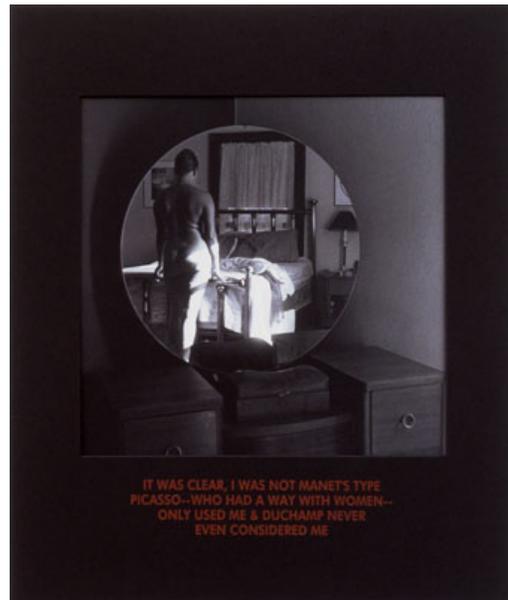
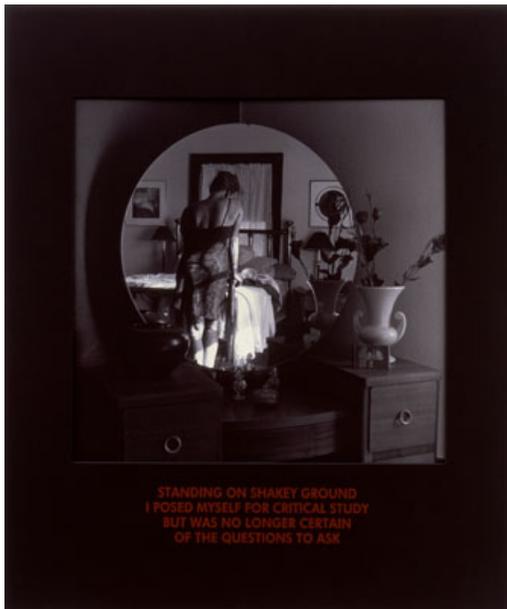


Figure 4, Carrie Mae Weems, *Not Manet's Type*, silver print with text on mat, 1997.



Figure 5, Carrie Mae Weems, *Untitled (Man and mirror)*, *The Kitchen Table Series*, silver gelatin print, 1990.



Figure 6, Carrie Mae Weems, *Untitled (Woman and daughter with makeup)*, *The Kitchen Table Series*, silver gelatin print, 1990.



Figure 7, *Narcissister*, *Everywoman*, video still, 2009.

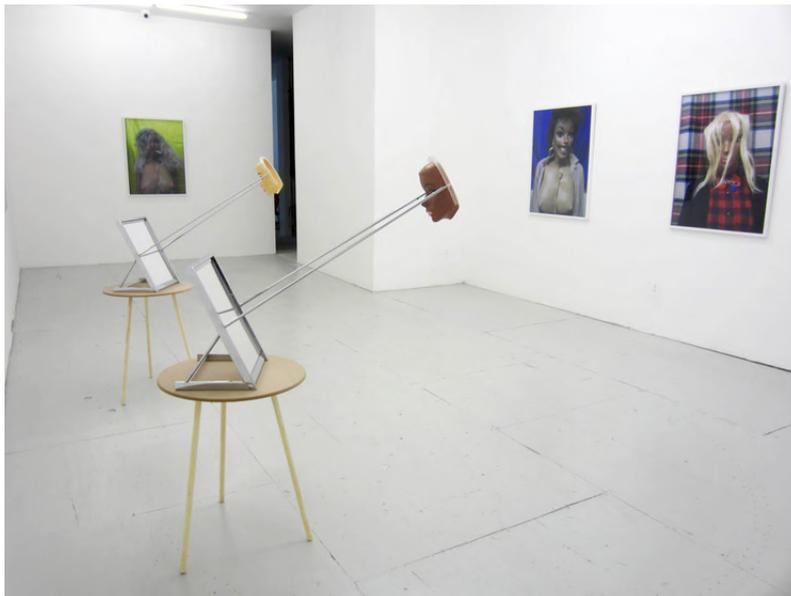


Figure 8, *Narcissister*, *Narcissister is You*, Envoy Arts, 2013.



Figure 9, *Narcissister, Narcissister is You*, Envoy Arts, 2013.



Figure 10, Narcissister, video still, San Francisco Art Institute, October, 2015.



Figure 11, Narcissister, video still, San Francisco Art Institute, October, 2015.

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