ENG 4775-001: Studies in Literary Criticism: Cultural Criticism as Dynamic Democracy

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Notes on bell hooks, *Cultural Criticism and Transformation*.

**Part II: Doing Cultural Criticism** (40 minutes)

### Hoop Dreams:
(Can there be an “innocent” filmmaker? An “objective” documentary?)
The film “re-inscribes the very values that it claims to critique.”

### Dealing with OJ:
The event was broadcast as a “spectacle,” implying the audience cannot participate without collusion with the white supremacist capitalist patriarchy. The life of the perpetrator acts as the presumed center, evoking identification with the man of violence, but Nicole Brown Simpson is the more complex study centering the issue of domestic violence (and thereby suppressed by the attention on OJ). Hence, the coverage became “the invitation to racialize the spectacle.” We’re encouraged to “move back to a one-dimensional account.”

### Madonna—from Feminism to Patriarchy:
“Stardom, by its very nature, has to be reproduced again and again.”

The “little-girl, sado-masochistic images undermine the powerful woman,” for “woman [is cast] as sex object not as [agent of] sexual power.” She, then, “leads [us] back to white supremacy [by her] use of black culture in videos to produce anti-black pronouncements” through her comments in *Spin* that black men are violent, “Supra-Masculine Menials” (Eldridge Cleaver, *Soul on Ice*, 1968, 155-175) without commenting on her own physical abuse at the hands of her white, ex-husband.

Hence, she feeds the American myth that “only dollars matter.” Such conscious construction of “stardom” not only allows collusion of people of color with the perpetuation of white supremacy or women with the culture of patriarchy, it also creates a culture where there is no moral or ethical evaluation that you can bring to bear on anything, so the assumption is that we all share the common morality of the dollar which is get as much as you can as quickly as you can by any means necessary.” (emphasis mine)

### Spike Lee—Hollywood’s Fall Guy:
Girl 6 challenges Hollywood through its critical reading of blackness in Hollywood: “white [directors] sanctioning white [directors] to become the new makers of so-called black films” such as *Waiting to Exhale*. Such production is then regarded as “blackness done successfully” whereas Spike Lee has “near misses,” implying his “failure as a filmmaker.” Several critics charge *Crooklyn* as having “no plot,” while it revolves around the dying mother. Hooks: “No plot? They mean no plot that interests us.” The issue, then, is who controls the representation of blackness in Hollywood and what motivates that representation.


**Kids—The Voyeur’s Gaze:**
A purported documentary-style saga of journey, dislocation and disorientation reproduces stereotypes without critical awareness; the “visual poetics” asks us to identify with “two white heterosexual misogynist boys” in which, during identification, the violent act of rape becomes “sexy cool” and the boy’s seductive language is spoken to an unconscious, “knocked out girl.”

“People are seduced by transgression in and of itself, as though transgression makes you radical and not what you are transgressing in the service of.”

**Rap—Authentic Expression or Market Construct?:**
While diverse in style, subject and performers, rap is the “perfect paradigm of colonialism.” That which gets the attention is rooted in “misogyny and moral obscenity...young white consumers can go and take out what they want...[these are] mostly young white suburban male consumers attracted to misogyny, obscenity and pugilistic eroticism.” So this form of rap is what makes the most money; “the producers go for profits.”

2 Live Crew’s album As Nasty as They Want 2 Be has sold in excess of two million copies. Annual sales of rap exceed $700 million. 2 Live Crew’s Luther Campbell’s estimated net worth is $11 million. Jerry Levin, CEO of Time/Warner, presides over annual music sales of $775 million. [Note these are 1997 figures and no longer accurate.]

Hooks: Why demand that rap musicians be more moral than other producers? The cultural critic must “first acknowledge they are making strategic choices and then critique those choices and their impact.” Such choices reflect “cultural production in a technological, capitalistic framework.” Profit supercedes product.

Hence, speaking of “authenticity [is] stupid and meaningless. [Rap is] authentic only to what it is...”

**Color Coding Black Female Bodies:**
Rap, among other cultural products, re-inscribes the female body in “traditional pornographic imagery” as the “color caste system [is] re-introduced and affirmed—the light-skinned, long, straight-haired black female as the desirable object [is] being overtly affirmed.”

Such re-inscription results in “consuming commodified blackness”:

“American culture is obsessed with transgression, and, to the degree that blackness remains a primary sign of transgression, one can talk about American mainstream culture as being obsessed with blackness, but blackness primarily in a commodified form that can then be possessed, owned, controlled and shaped by the consumer and not with an engagement in black culture that might require one to be a participant and, therefore, to be in some way transformed by what you are consuming as opposed to being merely of the hierarchy.”

Hence, there is “no correlation often between the consumption of the commodity of blackness and the culture from which that commodity comes.”
Exotic Blackness:

This commodified blackness appeals, then, perhaps in the absence of too little actual transgressive “white” culture, to the safety of blackness as a “simulacrum.” (See Jean Baudrillard’s *Simulations* [1976] wherein he argues that American mass-consumerism combined with technological advances, using Disneyland for his example, has made American culture a media-generated reality.)

Hooks: “Exotic blackness allows whiteness to remain static, to remain conservative and its conservative thrust to go unnoticed, so, as we’re having a mounting fascism in the United States that is perpetuated increasingly by liberal young, moneyed, liberal white people, if they’re wearing “black” clothes or listening to “black” music, they can be perceived as transgressive, as radicals, when, in fact, once again we see a separation between material aspirations and cultural and social interests, so that, at any point in time, they can drop their interest in blackness and do whatever they need to do to reinforce their class interests, the interests of white supremacy, the interests of capitalism and imperialism. This is frightening because it’s so deep and profound. It really suggests the way in which fantasy will more and more mediate fascism as it has always done in the past.

Pretend that you’re going somewhere that you’re not really going, stay in place and be ready to serve the State when the State calls you because you really haven’t left home. And I think that’s a lot of what’s happening.”

Those of you who may be planning to teach may wish to consult the following:
