

The background of the entire page is a dense, chaotic pattern of red scribbles and brushstrokes on a black background. The scribbles are thick and expressive, creating a sense of movement and texture. The text is overlaid on this background.

bell hooks

Outlaw Culture

Outlaw Culture

'The reader discovers . . . that bell hooks is a joy to read, her work a nimbly written hybrid form of social commentary, by turns personal, political, and in-your-face.'

San Francisco Chronicle Examiner

'*Outlaw Culture* should be read, regardless of whether one agrees with feminism as presented by hooks. hooks raises critical issues that all should find engaging as well as challenging!'

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Outlaw Culture

Resisting representations



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for John Amarih—stepping out on faith

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INTRODUCTION

The heartbeat of cultural revolution

From the moment I returned to living in a small town, children reentered my daily life. Before I left the racially segregated Southern town where I was born and raised, it would have been impossible for me to imagine a life that did not include the constant presence of children. In that world, being single and childless would not have deprived me of their company. Living in poor and working-class black culture, among extended family and community, it would have been seen as strange not to talk to, know, and love children. When I left that world to attend predominantly white universities for undergraduate and graduate study, each step I made on the ladder leading me to tenure and the distinguished professorship I hold today took me further away from the lives of children.

In the predominantly white world of bourgeois academic social relations, where children tend to be seen as “private

property,” it is rare to have the opportunity to form close, passionate, cross-generational, non-family-based friendships. Yet when I moved to a small town six years ago and rented a large old house with plenty of bats and a tiny bathroom (off the kitchen, with no door), children just walked back into my life. Somehow word spread around the neighborhood that I had built this bright red door leading into a tiny room with low ceilings, a perfect room for small people. Children climbed the steps up to my porch and asked to see the red door. And that is how I came to be sitting in my living room one day with two little black girls, talking about teaching and writing, telling them about cultural criticism.

At first it was hard to explain the meaning of cultural studies, the practice of cultural criticism. But then a print of Jacob Lawrence’s painting “The Lovers” beckoned to me. We were all sitting facing the wall where it hung in front of a red rocking chair. My new little girlfriends have already let me know they thought I “have a thing about the color red.” In Trinh T. Minh-ha’s exciting book on representation, *When the Moon Waxes Red*, she explains red’s lure: “At once an unlimited and profoundly subjective color, red can physio- or psychologically close in as well as open up. It points to both a person’s boundless inner voyage, and the indeterminate outer burning of the worlds of war. Through centuries, it remains the badge of revolution.” And indeed I tell the girls, “I’m into red ’cause it’s so revolutionary,” a comment that sparks intense giggles.

We begin our talk about cultural studies with the color red, with its meaning in black life. Already they know that red is a color for seduction and desire. We talk about the Lawrence painting, what they see when they really look at it—hard—hard. We talk about everything we see that we like, the way the lovers are sitting on the couch with the record player beside them, looking like they are dancing, only they are sitting down. We try and imitate them. We talk about the jet black color of their bodies and the bright red of the table next to them. Already they know

about color caste, about the way dark black color makes one less desirable. Connecting all these pieces, we find a way to understand Jacob Lawrence, desire and passion in black life. We practice culture criticism and feel the fun and excitement of learning in relation to living regular life, of using everything we already know to know more.

Merging critical thinking in everyday life with knowledge learned in books and through study has been the union of theory and practice that has informed my intellectual cultural work. Passionately concerned with education for critical consciousness, I continually search for ways to think, teach, and write that excite and liberate the mind, that passion to live and act in a way that challenges systems of domination: racism, sexism, class elitism. When I first begin working as an Assistant Professor of English and Black Studies at Yale University, I felt so limited by conventional pedagogy, by the emphasis on specialization and periodization. Doing interdisciplinary work in graduate school, I found this made me suspect—less legitimate. It threatened folks that I could be busy writing books on black women and feminism while studying medieval literature. Crossing boundaries seemed even harder as I moved up the academic hierarchy. Everyone in authority seemed to want us to stay in one place. When that crossing was coupled with progressive commitment to Left politics and a desire to write in a manner that would make my ideas accessible to a world beyond the academy, it made me feel all the more like a radical outsider, someone who only felt at home in the margins—in women’s studies and black studies where interdisciplinary work was encouraged and affirmed.

Everything changed when white male academics in the United States “discovered” cultural studies. Suddenly, much that had once been illegitimate became the rage. The work that I did—eclectic, interdisciplinary, inspired by revolutionary political visions—had an acceptable place, another home. It could fit with the cultural studies framework black British critic Stuart Hall

evoked when he declared that: “The work that cultural studies has to do is to mobilize everything that it can find in terms of intellectual resources in order to understand what keeps making the lives we live, and the societies we live in, profoundly and deeply antihuman.” Not only did I find in cultural studies a site where I could freely transgress boundaries, it was a location that enabled students to enter passionately a pedagogical process firmly rooted in education for critical consciousness, a place where they felt recognized and included, where they could unite knowledge learned in classrooms with life outside.

Combining theory and practice was the pedagogical strategy I had always used, that had inspired and motivated my teaching. It was great to have an acceptable framework to share knowledge that came from pushing against boundaries, moving out of one’s place. In their introduction to *Between Borders: Pedagogy and the Politics of Cultural Studies*, Henry Giroux and Peter McLaren emphasize the way “cultural studies combines theory and practice in order to affirm and demonstrate pedagogical practices engaged in creating a new language, rupturing disciplinary boundaries, decentering authority, and rewriting the institutional and discursive borderlands in which politics becomes a condition for reasserting the relationship between agency, power, and struggle.” In the classroom, cultural criticism was the approach to learning that excited students, connecting them across race, class, gender, sexual practices, and a host of other “differences.” This excitement was intensified when the focus of critique turned to popular culture. Using this same pedagogical strategy outside the academy, I found that everyday folks from all walks of life were eager to share thoughts and talk critically about popular culture. Cultural studies was similar to Black Studies and Women’s Studies in the way it affirmed interdisciplinary work, in its acknowledgment that education is not politically neutral. But it was different in that it affirmed our right and responsibility as academics to study and write about popular culture seriously. Talking critically

about popular culture was a powerful way to share knowledge, in and outside the academy, across differences, in an oppositional and subversive way.

Even though cultural studies that looks at popular culture has the power to move intellectuals both out of the academy and into the streets where our work can be shared with a larger audience, many critical thinkers who do cultural criticism are afraid to make that move. They prefer to score points by remaining in the academic world and representing radical chic there. This is especially the case when academics feel they are less cool if they attempt to link cultural studies's intellectual practice with radical politicization. The desire to "appear cool" or "down" has led to the production of a body of cultural studies work in the United States that appropriates and rewrites the scripts and meanings of popular culture in ways that attribute to diverse cultural practices subversive, radical transgressive intent and power even when there is little evidence to suggest this is the case. This has been especially true of the academic work produced about popular icons (Madonna, for example). Voyeuristic cannibalization of popular culture by cultural critics is definitely dangerous when the intent is purely opportunistic. However, when we desire to decolonize minds and imaginations, cultural studies' focus on popular culture can be and is a powerful site for intervention, challenge, and change.

All the essays and dialogues in *Outlaw Culture: Resisting Representations* emerge from a practical engagement with cultural practices and cultural icons who are defined as on the edge, as pushing the limits, disturbing the conventional, acceptable politics of representation. Starting from the standpoint that it is not the work of cultural critics merely to affirm passively cultural practices already defined as radical or transgressive, I cross boundaries to take another look, to contest, to interrogate, and in some cases to recover and redeem. These essays reflect the desire to construct frameworks where border crossing will not be evoked simply as

a masturbatory mental exercise that condones the movement of the insurgent intellectual mind across new frontiers (another version of the jungle safari), or become the justification for movements from the center into the margin that merely mimic in a new way old patterns of cultural imperialism and colonialism. Working with students and families from diverse class backgrounds, I am constantly amazed at how difficult it is to cross boundaries in this white supremacist, capitalist, patriarchal society. And it is obviously most difficult for individuals who lack material privilege or higher levels of education to make the elaborate shifts in location, thought, and life experience cultural critics talk and write about as though it is only a matter of individual will. To claim border crossing, the mixing of high and low, cultural hybridity, as the deepest expression of a desired cultural practice within multicultural democracy means that we must dare to envision ways such freedom of movement can be experienced by everyone. Since the disruption of the colonized/colonizer mind-set is necessary for border crossings to not simply reinscribe old patterns, we need strategies for decolonization that aim to change the minds and habits of everyone involved in cultural criticism. In these essays, I call attention to class and the myriad ways in which structures of class privilege prevent those who are not materially privileged from having access to those forms of education for critical consciousness, that are essential to the decolonization process. What does it mean for us to educate young, privileged, predominantly white students to divest of white supremacy if that work is not coupled with work that seeks to intervene in and change internalized racism that assaults people of color; to share feminist thinking and practice if that work is not coupled with fierce action; to share feminist thought and change sexism in all walks of life? To create a culture where those who could occupy the colonizing location have the freedom to self-interrogate, challenge, and change while the vast majority of the colonized lack such freedom is merely to keep in place

existing structures of domination. Politically, we do not live in a postcolonial world, because the mind-set of neo-colonialism shapes the underlying metaphysics of white supremacist capitalist patriarchy. Cultural criticism can be an agent for change, educating for critical consciousness in liberatory ways, only if we start with a mind-set and a progressive politics that is fundamentally anticolonialist, that negates cultural imperialism in all its manifestations.

Crossing borders within the academic world, moving in and out of Black Studies, Women's Studies, traditional English departments, and cultural studies, I am continually distressed by the willingness of one group to repudiate domination in one form while supporting it in another—white men who take sexism seriously but are not concerned with racism or vice versa, black men who are concerned with ending racism but do not want to challenge sexism, white women who want to challenge sexism but cling to racism, black women who want to challenge racism and sexism but claim class hierarchy. To arrive at the just, more humane world Stuart Hall envisions cultural studies as having the power to help create, we must be willing to courageously surrender participation in whatever sphere of coercive hierarchical domination we enjoy individual and group privilege. Given that cultural fascism is on the rise, that there is such open demand for separatist politics, embracing notions of inclusion and exclusion, whether based on shared gender, race, or nationality, seriously impedes all progressive effort to create a culture where border crossing enables both the sharing of resources and the production of a culture of communalism and mutuality. The fierce willingness to repudiate domination in a holistic manner is the starting point for progressive cultural revolution. Cultural criticism can be and is a vital location for the exchange of knowledge, or the formation of new epistemologies.

As I pondered the fascination those children of diverse gender, race/ethnicity, nationality, class, and as yet undeclared sexual

practice expressed about the red door, I began to think about the politics of space. This door led into a room designed for small bodies: everything in reach, nothing placed to intimidate or threaten. Although I was unable to conjure clear memories, I tried to remember my relationship to space as a child, the ways the break with dependency on grown-ups or older, bigger siblings and the assertion of one's own agency was a declaration of freedom and power. I remember thinking—and, like all cultural critics who are children, sharing my observation with the world around me—that if I had the power, I would make everything in the world be the right size for children, and grown-ups would have to learn how to do everything differently. In many ways progressive cultural revolution can happen only as we learn to do everything differently. Decolonizing our minds and imaginations, we learn to think differently, to see everything with “the new eyes” Malcolm X told us we needed if we were to enter the struggle as subjects and not objects. These essays and dialogues represent my ongoing growth as artist, cultural critic, feminist theorist, writer, seeker on the path. Contrary to convention, I almost always first imagine a collection of essays I want to write and then produce them as cultural events excite my imagination. Some of my essays appear first in magazines, because I am eager to spread the message, get critical feedback, and to speak to and with diverse audiences; publishing work in multiple locations makes that possible. The work in *Outlaw Culture* often begins where earlier published work stopped; at times it may repeat for emphasis and remembrance. Though I see it as all connected, each piece has a different take on culture and reality. Polyphonic, it combines the many voices I speak—academic talk, standard English, vernacular patois, the language of the street. Celebrating and affirming insurgent intellectual cultural practice, it is symbolically a red door—an invitation to enter a space of changing thought, the open mind that is the heartbeat of cultural revolution.

1

POWER TO THE PUSSY

We don't wannabe dicks in drag

I believe in the power of Madonna, that she has the balls to be the patron saint of new feminism.

—Kate Tentler, *The Village Voice*

In my twenties, I made my first pilgrimage to Europe. Journeying there was a necessary initiation for any young artist in the United States destined to lead a Bohemian life of intensity, a life on the edge, full of adventure. Nothing about being black, female, working class, growing up in a racially segregated Southern town, where the closest I ever came to ecstasy was during Sunday morning church service, made me think that the doors of avant-garde radical cool would be closed to me. Confined and restrained by family, region, and religion, I was inwardly homeless, suffering, I believed, from a heartbreaking estrangement from a divine community of radical artistic visionaries whom I imagined were longing for me to join them.

In much pain, I spent my childhood years dreaming of the moment when I would find my way home. In my imagination, home was a place of radical openness, of recognition and reconciliation, where one could create freely.

Europe was a necessary starting place for this search. I believed I would not find there the dehumanizing racism so pervasive here that it crippled black creativity. The Europe of my imagination was a place of artistic and cultural freedom, where there were no limits or boundaries. I had learned about this Europe in books, in the writings of black expatriates. Yet this was not the Europe I discovered. The Europe I journeyed to was a place where racism was ever present, only it took the form of a passion for the “primitive,” the “exotic.” When a friend and I arrived in Paris, a taxi driver took us to a hotel where pictures of nude black females adorned the walls. Everywhere, I encountered the acceptance and celebration of blackness as long as it remained within the confines of primitivism.

Ironically, white Europeans were constantly urging me to join them in their affirmation of Europe as a more free, less racist, more culturally open place than the United States. At some point I was told that Europeans, unlike white Americans, had no trouble worshipping a black Madonna; this was proof that their culture was able to move beyond race and racism. Indeed, European friends insisted that I make a pilgrimage to Montserrat to see for myself. At the shrine of the Black Madonna I saw long lines of adoring white worshippers offering homage. They were praying, crying, longing to caress and touch, to be blessed by this mysterious black woman saint. In their imaginations her presence was the perfect embodiment of the miraculous. To be with her was to be in the place of ecstasy. Indeed, momentarily in this sanctuary, race, class, gender, and nationality had fallen away. In their place was a vision of hope and possibility. Yet this moment in no way altered the politics of domination outside, in that space of the real. Only in the realm of the sacred imaginary was

there the possibility of transcendence. None of us could remain there.

My journey ended. I did not return home to become a Bohemian artist. My creative work, painting and writing, was pushed to the background as I worked hard to succeed in the academy, to become something I had never wanted to be. To this day I feel as imprisoned in the academic world as I felt in the world of my growing up. And I still cling to the dream of a radical visionary artistic community that can sustain and nurture creativity.

I share these memories and reflections as a preface to talking about Madonna as a cultural icon, to contextualize what she has represented for me. Early on, I was enamored of her not so much because I was “into” her music—I was into her presence. Her image, like that of the Black Madonna, evoked a sense of promise and possibility, a vision of freedom; feminist in that she was daring to transgress sexist boundaries; Bohemian in that she was an adventurer, a risk taker; daring in that she presented a complex, non-static ever-changing subjectivity. She was intense, into pleasure, yet disciplined. For me and many other young “hip” feminist women confined in the academy, Madonna was a symbol of unrepessed female creativity and power—sexy, seductive, serious, and strong. She was the embodiment of that radical risk-taking part of my/our female self that had to be repressed daily for us to make it in the institutionalized world of the mainstream, in the academy. For a long while, her transgressive presence was a beacon, a guiding light, charting the journey of female “feminist” artists coming to power—coming to cultural fulfillment.

These days, watching Madonna publicly redefine her persona away from this early politicized image of transgressive female artistry necessarily engenders in diverse feminist admirers feelings of betrayal and loss. We longed to witness the material girl enter mature womanhood still embodying a subversive feminist