

BLACK LOOKS

race and representation



bell hooks

Black Looks



Race and Representation



bell hooks



South End Press
Boston, MA

Copyright © 1992 by Gloria Watkins.

Any properly footnoted quotation of up to 500 sequential words may be used without permission so long as the total number of words quoted does not exceed 2,000. For longer quotations or for a greater number of total words, authors should write to South End Press for permission.

Printed in the U.S.A. on recycled, acid-free paper.

Text design and layout by the South End Press collective.

Cover design by Julie Ault and Gloria Watkins.

Cover photo from *The Black West* by William Loren Katz, Open Hand Publishing Inc., 1987. Used with the kind permission of William Loren Katz.

Grateful acknowledgment is made to the following publications for permission to use previously published material: *Black American Literature Forum*; *Z Magazine*; and the book *Cultural Studies*, edited by Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, and Paula Treichler, New York: Routledge, 1992.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Hooks, Bell.

Black looks : race and representation / Bell Hooks.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographic references.

ISBN 0-89608-433-7 : \$12.00

1. Afro-American women. 2. Afro-Americans—Social conditions—1975- 3. Racism—United States. 4. United States—Race relations. I. Title

E185.86.H734 1992

92-6954

305.48'896073—dc20

CIP

South End Press, 116 Saint Botolph Street, Boston, MA 02115

9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

92 93 94 95 96 97 98 99



I dedicate this book to all of us who love blackness,
who dare to create in our daily lives
spaces of reconciliation and forgiveness
where we let go of past hurt, fear, shame
and hold each other close.

It is only in the act and practice
of loving blackness
that we are able to reach out
and embrace the world
without destructive bitterness
and ongoing collective rage.

Holding each other close across differences,
beyond conflict, through change,
is an act of resistance.

I am especially grateful to those
who hold me close and do not let me go;
to those of you who challenge me
to live theory in a place beyond words
(to you Angela, Anthony, Anu, Gwenda,
Julie, Karen, Paul, Susan, Valeria,
and those unnamed
whom my heart remembers).

Introduction

Revolutionary Attitude

Decolonization...continues to be an act of confrontation with a hegemonic system of thought; it is hence a process of considerable historical and cultural liberation. As such, decolonization becomes the contestation of all dominant forms and structures, whether they be linguistic, discursive, or ideological. Moreover, decolonization comes to be understood as an act of exorcism for both the colonized and the colonizer. For both parties it must be a process of liberation: from dependency, in the case of the colonized, and from imperialist, racist perceptions, representations, and institutions which, unfortunately, remain with us to this very day, in the case of the colonizer...Decolonization can only be complete when it is understood as a complex process that involves both the colonizer and the colonized.

—Samia Nehrez

If we compare the relative progress African Americans have made in education and employment to the struggle to gain control over how we are represented, particularly in the mass media, we see that there has been little change in the area of representation. Opening a magazine or book, turning on the television set, watching a film, or looking at photographs in public spaces, we are most likely to see images of black people that reinforce and reinscribe white supremacy. Those images may be constructed by white people who have not divested of racism, or by people of color/black people who may see the world through the lens of white supremacy—internalized racism. Clearly, those of us committed to black liberation struggle, to the freedom and self-determination of all black people, must face daily the tragic reality

that we have collectively made few, if any, revolutionary interventions in the area of race and representation.

Theorizing black experience in the United States is a difficult task. Socialized within white supremacist educational systems and by a racist mass media, many black people are convinced that our lives are not complex, and are therefore unworthy of sophisticated critical analysis and reflection. Even those of us righteously committed to black liberation struggle, who feel we have decolonized our minds, often find it hard to "speak" our experience. The more painful the issues we confront the greater our inarticulateness. James Baldwin understood this. In *The Fire Next Time*, he reminded readers that "there has been almost no language" to describe the "horrors" of black life.

Without a way to name our pain, we are also without the words to articulate our pleasure. Indeed, a fundamental task of black critical thinkers has been the struggle to break with the hegemonic modes of seeing, thinking, and being that block our capacity to see ourselves oppositionally, to imagine, describe, and invent ourselves in ways that are liberatory. Without this, how can we challenge and invite non-black allies and friends to dare to look at us differently, to dare to break their colonizing gaze?

Speaking about his recent film *The Camp at Thiaroye*, African filmmaker Ousmane Sembene explains: "You must understand that for people like us, there are no such things as models. We are called upon to constantly create our models. For African people, Africans in the diaspora, it's pretty much the same. Colonialism means that we must always rethink everything." Challenged to rethink, insurgent black intellectuals and/or artists are looking at new ways to write and talk about race and representation, working to transform the image.

There is a direct and abiding connection between the maintenance of white supremacist patriarchy in this society and the institutionalization via mass media of specific images, representations of race, of blackness that support and maintain the oppression, exploitation, and overall domination of all black people. Long before white supremacists ever reached the shores of what we now call the United States, they constructed images of blackness and black people to uphold and affirm their notions of racial superiority, their political imperialism, their will to dominate and enslave. From slavery on, white supremacists have recognized that control over images is central to the maintenance of any system of racial domination. In his essay "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," Stuart Hall emphasizes that we can properly understand the

traumatic character of the colonial experience by recognizing the connection between domination and representation:

The ways in which black people, black experiences, were positioned and subjected in the dominant regimes of representation were the effects of a critical exercise of cultural power and normalization. Not only, in Said's "orientalist" sense, were we constructed as different and other within the categories of knowledge of the West by those regimes. They had the power to make us see and experience *ourselves* as "Other"...It is one thing to position a subject or set of peoples as the Other of a dominant discourse. It is quite another thing to subject them to that "knowledge," not only as a matter of imposed will and domination, but by the power of inner compulsion and subjective conformation to the norm.

That the field of representation remains a place of struggle is most evident when we critically examine contemporary representations of blackness and black people.

I was painfully reminded of this fact recently when visiting friends on a once colonized black island. Their little girl is just reaching that stage of preadolescent life where we become obsessed with our image, with how we look and how others see us. Her skin is dark. Her hair chemically straightened. Not only is she fundamentally convinced that straightened hair is more beautiful than curly, kinky, natural hair, she believes that lighter skin makes one more worthy, more valuable in the eyes of others. Despite her parents' effort to raise their children in an affirming black context, she has internalized white supremacist values and aesthetics, a way of looking and seeing the world that negates her value.

Of course this is not a new story. I could say the same for my nieces, nephews, and millions of black children here in the States. What struck me about this little girl was the depths of her pain and rage. She was angry. And yet her anger had no voice. It could not say, "Mommy, I am upset that all these years from babyhood on, I thought I was a marvelous, beautiful gifted girl, only to discover that the world does not see me this way." Often she was "acting out"—behaving in a manner that in my childhood days would have made older "colonized" black folks talk about her as evil, as a little Sapphire. When I tried to intervene and talk with her mother about the need to directly address issues of race and representation, I sensed grave reluctance, denial even. And it struck me that for black people, the pain of learning that we cannot control our images, how we see ourselves (if our vision is

not decolonized), or how we are seen is so intense that it rends us. It rips and tears at the seams of our efforts to construct self and identify. Often it leaves us ravaged by repressed rage, feeling weary, dispirited, and sometimes just plain old brokenhearted. These are the gaps in our psyche that are the spaces where mindless complicity, self-destructive rage, hatred, and paralyzing despair enter.

To face these wounds, to heal them, progressive black people and our allies in struggle must be willing to grant the effort to critically intervene and transform the world of image making authority of place in our political movements of liberation and self-determination (be they anti-imperialist, feminist, gay rights, black liberation, or all of the above and more). If this were the case, we would be ever mindful of the need to make radical intervention. We would consider crucial both the kind of images we produce and the way we critically write and talk about images. And most important, we would rise to the challenge to speak that which has not been spoken.

For some time now the critical challenge for black folks has been to expand the discussion of race and representation beyond debates about good and bad imagery. Often what is thought to be good is merely a reaction against representations created by white people that were blatantly stereotypical. Currently, however, we are bombarded by black folks creating and marketing similar stereotypical images. It is not an issue of "us" and "them." The issue is really one of standpoint. From what political perspective do we dream, look, create, and take action? For those of us who dare to desire differently, who seek to look away from the conventional ways of seeing blackness and ourselves, the issue of race and representation is not just a question of critiquing the *status quo*. It is also about transforming the image, creating alternatives, asking ourselves questions about what types of images subvert, pose critical alternatives, and transform our worldviews and move us away from dualistic thinking about good and bad. Making a space for the transgressive image, the outlaw rebel vision, is essential to any effort to create a context for transformation. And even then little progress is made if we transform images without shifting paradigms, changing perspectives, ways of looking.

The critical essays gathered in *Black Looks: Race and Representation* are gestures of defiance. They represent my political struggle to push against the boundaries of the image, to find words that express what I see, especially when I am looking in ways that move against the grain, when I am seeing things that most folks want to believe simply are not there. These essays are about identity. Since decolonization as

a political process is always a struggle to define ourselves in and beyond the act of resistance to domination, we are always in the process of both remembering the past even as we create new ways to imagine and make the future.

Stuart Hall names this process eloquently in this powerful statement, again from the essay "Cultural Identity and Diaspora":

Cultural identity...is a matter of "becoming" as well as "being." It belongs to the future as much as to the past. It is not something which already exists, transcending place, time, history, and culture. Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But, like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation. Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialized past, they are subject to the continuous "play" of history, culture and power. Far from being grounded in a mere "recovery" of the past, which is waiting to be found, and which, when found, will secure our sense of ourselves into eternity, identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past.

In *Black Looks*, I critically interrogate old narratives, suggesting alternative ways to look at blackness, black subjectivity, and, of necessity, whiteness.

While also exploring literature, music, and television, many of these essays focus on film. The emphasis on film is so central because it, more than any other media experience, determines how blackness and black people are seen and how other groups will respond to us based on their relation to these constructed and consumed images. In the essay "Black Feminism: The Politics of Articulation," filmmaker Pratibha Parmar states, "Images play a crucial role in defining and controlling the political and social power to which both individuals and marginalized groups have access. The deeply ideological nature of imagery determines not only how other people think about us but how we think about ourselves."

Many audiences in the United States resist the idea that images have an ideological intent. This is equally true of black audiences. Fierce critical interrogation is sometimes the only practice that can pierce the wall of denial consumers of images construct so as not to face that the real world of image-making is political—that politics of domination inform the way the vast majority of images we consume are constructed and marketed. Most black folks do not want to think critically about why they can sit in the darkness of theaters and find

pleasure in images that cruelly mock and ridicule blackness. That is why many of the essays in *Black Looks* focus on spectatorship.

I ask that we consider the perspective from which we look, vigilantly asking ourselves who do we identify with, whose image do we love. And if we, black people, have learned to cherish hateful images of ourselves, then what process of looking allows us to counter the seduction of images that threatens to dehumanize and colonize. Clearly, it is that way of seeing which makes possible an integrity of being that can subvert the power of the colonizing image. It is only as we collectively change the way we look at ourselves and the world that we can change how we are seen. In this process, we seek to create a world where everyone can look at blackness, and black people, with new eyes.

In 1962, at the age of thirty-two, only a few years before her unexpected death from cancer, black woman playwright Lorraine Hansberry wrote a letter in response to a "white farm boy living on a rich, fertile farm on the Mason-Dixon line" who was concerned that black people were becoming too militant. She answered that "the condition of our people dictates what can only be called revolutionary attitudes." In the letter she also declared, "The acceptance of our present condition is the only form of extremism which discredits us before our children." Many black folks refuse to look at our present condition because they do not want to see images that might compel them to militance. But militancy is an alternative to madness. And many of us are daily entering the realm of the insane. Like Pecola, in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, black folks turn away from reality because the pain of awareness is so great. Yet it is only by becoming more fully aware that we begin to see clearly.

We experience our collective crisis as African American people within the realm of the image. Whether it is the face of homeless folks encountered in city streets or small town alleyways, the wandering gaze of the unemployed, the sight of our drug addicted loved ones, or some tragic scene from a film that lingers in the mind's eye, *we see that we are in trouble*. I can still see the images of young black men brutally murdering one another that were part of the fictional narrative of John Singleton's film *Boyz 'N The Hood*. These images were painful to watch. That is how it should be. It should hurt our eyes to see racial genocide perpetuated in black communities, whether fictional or real. Yet, in the theater where I saw this film, the largely black audience appeared to find pleasure in these images. This response was powerful testimony, revealing that those forms of representation in white supremacist

society that teach black folks to internalize racism are so ingrained in our collective consciousness that we can find pleasure in images of our death and destruction. What can the future hold if our present entertainment is the spectacle of contemporary colonization, dehumanization, and disempowerment where the image serves as a murder weapon. Unless we transform images of blackness, of black people, our ways of looking and our ways of being seen, we cannot make radical interventions that will fundamentally alter our situation.

This struggle needs to include non-black allies as well. Images of race and representation have become a contemporary obsession. Commodification of blackness has created a social context where appropriation by non-black people of the black image knows no boundaries. If the many non-black people who produce images or critical narratives about blackness and black people do not interrogate their perspective, then they may simply recreate the imperial gaze—the look that seeks to dominate, subjugate, and colonize. This is especially so for white people looking at and talking about blackness. In his essay “The Miscegenated Gaze,” black male artist Christian Walker suggests, “If white artists, committed to the creation of a non-racist, non-sexist and non-hierarchical society, are ever to fully understand and embrace their own self-identity and their own miscegenated gaze, they will have to embrace and celebrate the concept of non-white subjectivity.” Their ways of looking must be fundamentally altered. They must be able to engage in the militant struggle by black folks to transform the image.

As a radical intervention we must develop revolutionary attitudes about race and representation. To do this we must be willing to think critically about images. We must be willing to take risks. The essays in *Black Looks* are meant to challenge and unsettle, to disrupt and subvert. They may make some folks get mad, go off, or just feel upset. That is the idea—to provoke and engage. Like that photographic portrait of Billy Holiday by Moneta Sleet I love so much, the one where instead of a glamorized image of stardom, we are invited to see her in a posture of thoughtful reflection, her arms bruised by tracks, delicate scars on her face, and that sad faraway look in her eyes. When I face this image, this black look, something in me is shattered. I have to pick up the bits and pieces of myself and start all over again—transformed by the image.