

MEDIA EDUCATION
FOUNDATION
TRANSCRIPT



Challenging media

BELL HOOKS

CULTURAL CRITISICM & TRANSFORMATION

BELL HOOKS—CULTURAL CRITISICM & TRANSFORMATION

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Featuring an interview with **bell hooks**, Distinguished Professor of English at City College of New York. One of America's most accessible public intellectuals, she is the author of fourteen books of commentary, criticism, & autobiography.

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PART ONE – On Cultural Criticism

WHY STUDY POPULAR CULTURE?

BELL HOOKS: The book that I've written that most try to talk to frame my concern with popular culture to a more general audience is the collection of essays *Outlaw Culture*. And in the beginning of that book what I say is that students from different class backgrounds and ethnicities would come to my classes and I would want them to read all this meta-linguistic theory of difference and otherness and they would say, 'well what does this have to do with our lives?' I found continually that if I took a movie and said, "Well did you go see this movie? And how do you think about it?" and I related something very concrete in popular culture to the kind of theoretical paradigms that I was trying to share with them through various work, people seem to grasp it more and not only that, it would seem to be much more exciting and much more interesting for everybody. Because popular culture has that power in everyday life.

[Movie: Forrest Gump] My momma always said life was like a box of chocolates. You never know what you're going to get.

BELL HOOKS: Whether we're talking about race or gender or class, popular culture is where the pedagogy is, it's where the learning is. So I think that partially people like me who started off doing feminist theory or more traditional literary criticism or what have you begin to write about popular culture, largely because of the impact it was having as the primary pedagogical medium for masses of people globally who want to, in some way, understand the politics of difference.

I mean it's been really exciting for someone like me, both in terms of the personal desires I have to remain bonded with the working class culture and experience that I came from as well as the sort of southern black aspect of that and at the same time to be a part of a diasporic world culture of ideas and to see how can there be a kind of interplay between all of those different forces. Popular culture is one of the sites where there can be an interplay.

CRITICAL THINKING AS TRANSFORMATION

BELL HOOKS: My own sense is that the most enabling resource that I can offer as a critic or an intellectual professor is the capacity to think critically about our lives. I think thinking critically is at the heart of anybody transforming their life and I really believe that a person who thinks critically, who, you know, may be extraordinarily disadvantaged, materially, can find ways to transform their lives, that can be deeply and profoundly meaningful in the same way that someone who maybe incredibly privileged materially and in crisis in their life may remain perpetually unable to resolve their life in any meaningful way if they don't think critically.

As someone who's moved from teaching at very fancy private predominantly white schools to teaching at an urban, predominantly non-white campus in Harlem. The first thing I noticed was that my students were equally brilliant in the Harlem setting as they were when I taught at Yale or Oberlin but their senses of what the meaning of that brilliance was and what they could do with it, their sense of agency was profoundly different. You know when students came to Yale, they came there knowing that they are the best and the brightest and they think that they have a certain kind of future ahead for them and they in a sense are opened to embracing that future. It has nothing to do with the level of knowledge. It has more to do with their sense of entitlement about having a future and when I see among my really brilliant students in Harlem, many of whom have very difficult lives, they work, they have children, is that they don't have that sense of entitlement, they don't have that imagination into a future of agency and as such, I think many professors do not try to give them the gift of critical thinking.

In a certain kind of patronizing way education just says, all these people need is tools for survival, basic survival tools, like their degree so they can get a job and not, in fact, that we enhance their lives in the same way we've enhanced our lives by engaging in a certain kind of critical process.

THE POWER OF REPRESENTATION

BELL HOOKS: It's scary to me now, because, particularly in issues around erotica and sexual violence, people want to deny the direct link between representations and how we live our lives. I think that it's possible to embrace the knowledge that there's a direct link between representations and choices we make in our lives that does not make that link absolute, that does not say, "oh, if I look at a movie in which a woman is fucked to death," than I will go out and think I should let myself be fucked to death by any man who wants to fuck me. I think that's an absurd sense of a direct link, but that is not to say, that if I watched enough of those images I might not come away thinking that certain forms of unacceptable male violence in coercion in relationship to my female body are acceptable.

It's frightening to me now when people want to behave as though certain images don't mean anything. I thought of this when I saw Larry Clark's *Kids* and I went back like in circles of progressive white friends and I said, "Oh, God, you know, the racial politics in terms of representation in this film really suck."

And they really wanted to say, it didn't matter. It didn't mean anything. And I was like, "Give me a fucking break. Like we know why the person is brutally bashed to death is a dark skinned black man, it's crucial that he's a dark skinned black man, because in fact, people's antipathy to dark skinned black men is actually much greater than their antipathy to black men in some kind of general way. I feel that it's frightening that as mass media uses more certain kinds of representations for specific impact and effect, we're also being told that these images are not really that important.

Think about all the Americans who've never ever in their lives for one second thought about Scotland and Ireland, who went to see *Braveheart*, who suddenly like put notions of British imperialism and the freedom of Ireland on their little social maps because of a Hollywood movie.

I was truly awed by how much Hollywood film could like totally alter people's perceptions of national liberation struggles globally in a way that would call attention to those who are in a sense the underclass in those struggles. And that is also the power of white male privilege. White male stardom. I mean it's important for people to look at who produced and directed that film. Because it's not just that Hollywood can do that, it's that specific liberal white men who are moneyed within the context of Hollywood can produce whatever images that they want to produce.

MOTIVATED REPRESENTATIONS

BELL HOOKS: We look at the recent movie *Smoke* where the thief is a black kid. Now in the original script – it's based on the story by Paul Auster – in the story there's no racial identification of the character. So when I talk to Wayne Wang who directed the film, I said, "Why did you choose to make the thief black?" He putters and stutters around but he can't say, he will not say, because the only thing he can say is, "This will give this movie more zip to make the thief black, it will make it more compelling to people. It will give a kind of good guy, bad guy quality to it and it will just make it all the more stimulating, because he would have to admit that the fact that he simultaneously in making that choice is also reproducing certain kinds of racial stereotypes." Nobody wants to lay claim to consciously constructing these images that perpetuate white supremacy, racism, etc.

And the ironic thing is that I can sit in classrooms in universities where my students don't want to accept that someone consciously creates that representation.

[Movie: *Star Wars*] *Where are those transmissions you intercepted? What have you done with those plans?*

BELL HOOKS: How come people didn't think about Darth Vader and the whole sort of sense of who decides what voice will constitute the villainous voice?

[Movie: *Star Wars*] *If this is a councillorship, where is the Ambassador?*

BELL HOOKS: What does it mean that media has such control of our imaginations that they don't want to accept that there are conscious manipulations taking place and that in fact, we want to reserve particularly for the arena of movie making a certain sense of magic? A certain sense that reality is being documented and, again, you know, I think that part of the power of cultural criticism and cultural studies has been it's sort of political intervention as a force in American society to say, there really is a conscious manipulation of representations and it's not about magical thinking, it's not about like pure imagination, creativity, it's about people consciously knowing what kinds of images will produce a certain kind of impact.

[Movie: *Braveheart*] *I will love you my whole life. You and no other.*

AN EXAMPLE OF MOTIVATED REPRESENTATION: *Leaving Las Vegas* & the Backlash Against Feminism

BELL HOOKS: One of the issues that no one wants to talk about is that finally the most successful political movement in the United States over the last twenty years was really the feminist movement and that there is a tremendous backlash to feminism that is being enacted on the stage of mass media. So that films like *Leaving Las Vegas* really are about ushering in a new old version of the desirable woman that really is profoundly misogynous based and sexist. It's no accident, we know that when women went into the factories in the World Wars because men were not here, that when those wars ended, mass media was used to get women out of the factory and back into the home, well in a sense mass media is being used in that very same way right now, to get women out of feminism and back into some patriarchal mode of thinking and movies to me are the lead propaganda machine in this right now.

[Movie: *Leaving Las Vegas*] *So for five hundred bucks you can do pretty much whatever you want. You can fuck my ass.
-- Ohmigod.
You can cum on my face.*

WHY “WHITE SUPREMACIST CAPITALIST PATRIARCHY?”

BELL HOOKS: I began to use the phrase in my work “white supremacist capitalist patriarchy” because I wanted to have some language that would actually remind us continually of the interlocking systems of domination that define our reality and not to just have one thing be like, you know, gender is the important issue, race is the important issue, but for me the use of that particular jargonistic phrase was a way, a sort of short cut way of saying all of these things actually are functioning simultaneously at all times in our lives and that if I really want to understand what's happening to me, right now at this moment in my life, as a black female of a certain age group, I won't be able to understand it if I'm only looking through the lens of race. I won't be able to understand it if I'm only looking through the lens of gender. I won't be able to understand it if I'm only looking at how white people see me.

To me an important break through, I felt, in my work and that of others was the call to use the term white supremacy, over racism because racism in and of itself did not really allow for a discourse of colonization and decolonization, the recognition of the internalized racism within people of color and it was always in a sense keeping things at the level at which whiteness and white people remained at the center of the discussion. In my classroom I might say to students that you know that when we use the term white supremacy it doesn't just evoke white people, it evokes a political world that we can all frame ourselves in relationship to.

And I think that I was able to do that because I grew up, again, in racial apartheid, where there was a color caste system. So that obviously I knew that through my own experiential reality, you know, that it wasn't just what white people do to black people that was wounding and damaging to our lives, I knew that when we went over to my grandmother's house, who looked white, who lived in a white neighborhood, and she called my sister, Blackie, because she was dark and her hair was nappy and my sister would sit in a corner and cry or not want to go over there. I knew that there is some system here that is hurting this little girl, that is not directly, the direct hit from the white person. And white supremacy was that term that allowed one to acknowledge our collusion with the forces of racism and imperialism.

And so for me those words were very much about the constant reminder, one of institutional construct, that we're not talking about personal construct in the sense of, how do you feel about me as a woman, or how do you feel about me as a black person? But they really seem to me to evoke a larger apparatus and I don't know why those terms have become so mocked by people because in fact, far from simplifying the issues, I think they actually when you merge them together really complicate the questions of freedom and justice globally, because it means then that we have to look at what black people are doing to each other in Rwanda, we can't just say racism, what have you. We have to problematize nationalism beyond race, in all kinds of ways that I think there's a tremendous reluctance, particularly in the United States to do, to have a more complex accounting of identity.

ENLIGHTENED WITNESS

BELL HOOKS: And the issue is not freeing ourselves from representation. It's really about being enlightened witnesses when we watch representations, which means we are able to be critically vigilant about both what is being told to us and how we respond to what is being told. Because I think that the answer is not the kind of censoring absolutism of a right wing political correctness but in fact of a proactive sense of agency that requires of all of us one, a greater level of literacy. I think that we cannot begin to talk about freedom and justice in any culture if we are not talking about mass based literacy movements. Because I think that literacy as we know from the work of Marshall McLuhan and many others that the degrees of literacy determine so often how we see what see, how we interpret it, what it means for our lives and that there's a way in which radical movements for freedom in the United States devalue the significance of literacy as a radical agenda for politicization.

So it seems to me that two major factors of intervention have to do with both critical thinking and then the capacity to read and write. Because so much enlightening information only comes through the printed page, so if people are not able to read and write they already don't have access to those forms of enlightenment. I mean if we look at someone like Malcolm X, he charts his own intellectual development through reading. If you look at me I chart major radical interventions in my life with books that I've read. Not movies that I've seen, not television shows, but books that I've read. We cannot over-value enough the importance of literacy to a culture that is deeply visual. I mean rather than seeing literacy and the visual and our pleasure in the visual as oppositional to one another, I think we have to see them as compatible with one another. I don't think we will get much further in terms of decolonizing our minds. So that we can both resist certain kinds of conservatizing representation and at the same time create new and exciting representations.

PART TWO: DOING CULTURAL CRITICISM

CONSTRUCTED NARRATIVE

BELL HOOKS: It's always difficult when I want people to see that I can be deeply moved by a film and at the same time see the kind of dilemmas that are involved in the production of certain kinds of representations and *Hoop Dreams* was another case where I wanted people to see that this documentary reflected as much about the individuals who shot it and directed it as it did the lives of the people that they were shooting and that they made certain kinds of choices. They made choices about when to show us that one of the boys had a girlfriend and that she was pregnant. It's like all of a sudden you blink, you think wait a minute, we didn't even know he had a girlfriend and now he's going to be a father. What happened? What that moment should have made audiences remember is that you are not getting some direct account of this individual's life or these two individuals, but that in fact, you are getting a version of their life mediated by the concerns and interests of the filmmakers. And I think people were very hostile to having again, to be asked not to think of this as a true story in the sense of the innocent filmmaker who is just turning the camera on the lives of these young black men and we get to see it, but in fact as people who had a very definite message that they wanted to get out of those lives.

I mean what really struck me about *Hoop Dreams* was that it presented itself initially as a critique of certain aspects of American sports, American idealism, American notion of democratic access to success.

[Movie: *Hoop Dreams*] *You have to realize that nobody cares about you. You're black. You're a young male; all you're supposed to do is deal drugs and mug women. The only reason why you're here, you can make their team win, if the team wins, these schools get a lot of money.*

BELL HOOKS: But in fact, as the film develops it re-inscribed those values as the important values. And in fact, the young man who turns his back on those values, I felt cinematically became the lesser character, the non-heroic character in the film. But we're not made to feel that it's heroic when he chooses to focus on his academic studies and not to play basketball. Which is where the film begins, I think, to let down its earlier critique in the interest of having a mass base appeal. The upbeat ending, the sort of conclusion that suggests, it was still possible for one of these black guys to succeed, to make it was part of what the thrill for many moviegoers, you know. That it wasn't an indictment of the American dream ultimately. That in fact it was a film that was saying, in spite of it all, in spite of the corruption, you can still hold on to this dream and it can give your life meaning.

DEALING WITH O.J.

BELL HOOKS: The O.J. Simpson case was not compelling to me personally as something to watch and to observe and to talk about because I felt the deepest terms in relation to Guy Debord's work on the Notion of Spectacle, it was situated as spectacle from the very beginning. It seemed to me that that construction of it as a kind of carnival, as a spectacle meant that one could actually not participate in that, without in fact colluding with the very forces, white supremacist capitalist patriarchy that had led to the violent death of Nicole Simpson in the first place. And I felt morally and ethically that as a feminist who has opposed domestic violence, who has wanted there to be a recognition of the meaning of domestic violence as one of the ways in which patriarchy affirms and perpetuates itself, it was impossible to feel that in any way benefiting from this, that I was actually not then colluding in not only affirming the patriarchal culture of violence that surrounded this case, but also actually working to do the very thing I critique about patriarchy in my work around domestic violence which is that we're made to think that this is a lesser story and the more interesting story is the story of the life of the perpetrator. It seems to me again and again that part of what patriarchy does to reaffirm itself and violence is one of the strategies that it perpetuates and reaffirms itself, is making us all identify with men who are violent as potentially our heroes.

[NBC News] *From a shelter for battered women in Chicago, a surprising reaction, cheering his innocence.*

BELL HOOKS: So it felt to me that the spectacle was already constructed before any of us were invited to be onlookers, observers, witnesses etcetera, in such a way that I simply did not believe that any of us as individuals had the power to intervene on it so that our words and our writings would not in fact be used to further the spectacle and not in fact to further people's concern with domestic violence and certainly Nicole Simpson was the incredible example of a person who had money and could have altered her life in significant ways that she did not choose to alter her life. Perfect candidate on a certain level for more complex understanding of patriarchy and domestic violence and women's allegiance to sexism. One of the sad aspects of Nicole Simpson's life was her own continual allegiance to sexism and patriarchy even as it was threatening her life.

[Tape of 911 Call]

- *What does he look like?*
 - *He's OJ Simpson. I think you know his record. Could you just send somebody over here?*
- *OK, what is he doing there?*
 - *He just drove up...*
- *Wait a minute, what kind of car is he in?*
 - *He's in a white Bronco. First of all, he broke the back door down to get in.*
- *Wait a minute, what's your name?*
 - *Nicole Simpson.*
- *Is he the sportscaster, or whatever?*

- Yeah.
- *Just stay on the line.*
- *I don't want to stay on the line. He's going to beat the shit out of me.*
- *Wait a minute. Just stay on the line so we can know what's going on until the police get there, OK?*
- *(Inaudible OJ Simpson talking)*
- *Could you just please?... OJ, OJ.*

BELL HOOKS: The one time that I did go on television and I said that I could be on Good Morning America, and I could be asked about the O.J. Simpson case and it stipulated all beforehand that I could be asked one question, I was asked to just give my response, but they really wanted me to say, who was innocent and who was guilty. And what I said was that the only thing I really knew about the O.J. Simpson case was that it began and ended with male violence and that no one to my knowledge ever speculated that there were a bunch of women waiting outside that house to hack anybody to death, you know, cut the cameras, that's not the quote that anybody wanted to hear, they wanted the black woman to be choosing against the white woman or to be protecting the black man, they wanted this whole racialized scenario. When the issue is male violence against women, let's bring on some other kind of issue that makes us not pay real attention to male violence. And that's why race offered the perfect sort of screen to have another drama that everybody could be linked to.

[NBC News]

(Crowds)

-- *Free OJ! Free OJ! Free OJ!*

-- *Not guilty! Not guilty is horrible! He's guilty as sin! It's a lousy fixed jury!*

BELL HOOKS: The masterful nature, conservative aspect of this spectacle was that it successfully got people to move back into very one-dimensional positions of identity, politics, of racial or sexual essentialism, because there was no frame within the spectacle itself to allow for a complex accounting of what was taking place. It's only in the aftermath now that we can enter the wreck of this spectacle and say, here's how we can account for it, more deeply. Here is how we can have a complex reading.

MADONNA: FROM FEMINISM TO PATRIARCHY

BELL HOOKS: Madonna always laid claim to being a female artist who was breaking new ground and in her own testimony laid claim to an engagement with feminist politics. A lot of times people act as though feminists bring an unwarranted critique to Madonna but I think Madonna receives so much attention from feminists precisely because she positioned herself as a woman within the music industry who was going to break new ground and who was going to challenge the sexism of that industry. And, as we know, for early on in her career she actually did live out that particular practice and that's I think, why many of us continue to have affection for her as a cultural icon even as we feel incredibly disturbed by the fact that stardom, which by its very nature has to be reproduced again and again, meant that at a certain point as an aging woman, Madonna had to have a new gimmick to renew interest in her, and it's not surprising that a major part of her re-invention of herself becomes a re-attachment to sexism.

When Madonna appeared in, I think it's *Vanity Fair*, that she appears in, in all the little girl sort of sexual sadomasochistic kind of pictures and everything, it's suddenly a complete repudiation of the kind of images of a powerful woman that she theoretically talked about wanted to put forth and it's a reinvestment in patriarchy, but let's face it, there's always going to be more money to be had and more stardom to be had in patriarchy and for a while Madonna worked the feminist revolutionary tip as far as she could push it and then she needed a new driving force.

To me Madonna symbolizes so much the question of greed. I think exactly like many rap musicians, I don't believe in her "real life" Madonna is committed to any of the sexist images that she's quite willing to reproduce for a profit. But, in fact, she's willing to turn that particular trick in order to make more and more money even though we all know this is an incredibly wealthy human being who theoretically should not have to debase and degrade her principles to earn money but the reproduction of stardom says, "I must earn more and more and more money" and it's interesting that not only does she come back to patriarchy but she also comes back to white supremacy.

I was so amazed by the incredible racist comments she makes in *Spin Magazine* in a recent interview about black culture and black men, when she goes on to tell us, "but black men are the most sexist men on the planet." I said it's kind of like Madonna out of Africa, it's like report from the front: "I went into the jungle, I fucked all those black men and I used black culture in my videos but I'm here to testify that they really are primitive, that they really are the most sexist people on the planet. I used to kind of like black people but I'm not sure I do any more." And I was really fascinated by that, cause I thought to myself, this person is actually using this interview to reposition herself as a voice for the Right. Because let's face it, there's more money to be made on the Right than there will ever be to be made on the Left.

But what was most sad was not her as an individual repositioning herself, but people not responding to the kinds of anti-black statements that she made with outrage and disgust. Here's a woman whose white husband was beating her up and yet she doesn't

tell us that any of these black men have engaged in domestic violence with her and yet black men come to stand for the most sexist people on the planet? And that was very, very distressing and distressing that as a contributing editor to *Spin*, as a black woman, I really couldn't get anybody involved with *Spin Magazine* to be at all interested and concerned about a critique of this particular issue or the statements because it was a big money making issue. I mean, I just recently did a seminar at Sony Music where I sat on a panel with black male executives who said, and a female executive who said, race is not the issue, the only color that matters in this society, is the color green, the color of dollars. This is another American myth – that people want to really believe right now that only dollars matter. Because not only does it allow the collusion of people of color with the perpetuation of white supremacy, or women with the perpetuation of patriarchy it also creates a culture where there is no moral or ethical valuation that you can bring to bear upon anything 'cause 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.

SPIKE LEE: HOLLYWOOD'S FALL GUY

BELL HOOKS: If I had talked about Spike Lee filmmaking before he made *Girl 6*, I would really be assessing him very differently from my assessment of him after he's made *Girl 6* because I find *Girl 6* to be a movie that not only challenges Hollywood, I feel that it's a critical read on Hollywood. I mean, that moment in the opening of the film you have Quentin Tarantino saying that he's going to make the best black film –

[Movie: Girl 6] This movie is going to be big – bigger than big, huge. The greatest romantic African American film ever made – directed by me, of course.

BELL HOOKS: I mean that was such a deconstructive moment when Spike Lee was saying, this is what blackness has come to mean in Hollywood. It doesn't have anything to do with what color the person is, it's a certain image of blackness that Hollywood finally believes can be negotiated by any cultural maker.

[Movie: Girl 6] I'm looking for the range of Angela Bassetts. We're looking for the total game; you know what I'm saying?

BELL HOOKS: Black people aren't needed to produce black cinematic culture because white people can produce that culture and there's a lot of critiques of Hollywood and a certain value system in *Girl 6* that Spike Lee himself has played along with in order to get to the position where he can use Hollywood as a vehicle to make certain critiques. I don't want to say in order to get there, to suggest some kind of continuum where the person says, I'm a radical, but I'll pretend I'm a conservative, you know, for ten years, but at the end of it all when I've made my wealth, I will make the radical cultural production. I think that it's precisely the opposite that no matter how successful Spike Lee has been in Hollywood he is still put down by mass media. He still does not have the level of opportunity that would be available to him had he been seen as a bright young white up and coming filmmaker.

So that I think that his bitterness towards that system is actually concrete and real and not a function of a kind of radicalization that pretended to be conservative and became more radical, but the kind of radicalization that comes from a person who wholeheartedly embraces the rules of the game and find that no matter how well they follow those rules, they still are not a real contestant in the game and they still cannot win.

A major magazine like *Time* or *Newsweek* just recently carried a story on Spike Lee as a failure. I mean it just was amazing! How could you talk about Spike Lee as a failure? It was something like, Malcolm X was made for thirty-seven million but it only made forty some million, and I thought well, how is that a failure? You not only paid for your movie but you had some excess profit though not a great deal, not what Hollywood would want. But that can become talked about in mass media as a failure, even though Woody Allen, who has made many films that do not make a lot of money, does not then get talked about as a failed filmmaker. And so that is in the interest of a certain structure of

white supremacy and patriarchy to put Spike Lee down at this point in his career and to make it seem that somehow he could not deliver the goods, because part of that is about sanctioning white people to become the new makers of so-called black film.

As in for example, a film like *Waiting to Exhale*, which is sold and marketed in ways that suggest this is a black film. I mean people kept telling me, this is a film about black women, this is going to be for black people. In fact this was a typical Hollywood shitty, uninteresting film, the script written by white people, all marketed as being a film by and about blackness, successfully. Nothing Spike Lee has done can match the financial return of this piece of shit. This is how blackness can be done successfully and the problem lies not with the terms of what makes blackness successful in Hollywood or on the screen, but with Spike Lee as an individual. And that I think is tragic because so many black people are buying into that mode of thinking. That Spike Lee somehow represents a failure, when in fact, Spike Lee will continue to be the most successful black filmmaker in the United States and he's not by any means a failure. T

Here's a way in which, as Hollywood decides to occupy the territory of blackness as white Hollywood decided to occupy the territory of blackness it becomes very useful to say, "we let black people have that territory and they just didn't know what to do with it. They made these strange films like *Girl 6*; it didn't even have a plot. I mean, *Crooklyn* didn't even have a plot," which of course, is completely bogus, because the plot of *Crooklyn* was very obvious and very simple, it was about a family where the mother is dying in the family. But I can't tell you how many white reviewers wrote that it didn't have plot. When what they should have said is that it didn't have a plot that interested us. That White America is not interested in black mothers that are dying. So I think that is going to have deep ramifications for the future of representing blackness in Hollywood. Because it really almost a public announcement of the white takeover of that particular territory, the issue of representing blackness in Hollywood.

THE VOYEUR'S GAZE

BELL HOOKS: *Kids* fascinated me as a film precisely because when you heard about it, it seemed like the perfect embodiment of the kind of postmodern, notions of journeying and dislocation and fragmentation and yet when you go to see it, it has simply such a conservative take on gender, on race, on the politics of HIV. All the people I know who are doing concrete work around teenagers and HIV were so saddened to go a film that reproduced the notion that somehow HIV is this thing that these teenagers know nothing about. There are these innocent girls having sex with the worldly boys and it reproduced all of these stereotypes that wouldn't in any way transgressive or critical in a way as to intervene on the status quo and that was really sad. And what was sadder is that it was again the kind of issue that divided progressive critics and thinkers because so many people who only saw *Kids* through the lens of transgressive sexuality felt that they needed to support it at a time when so much art funding, so much effort towards censorship is directed at shutting down images that are perceived to be vulgar or obscene, erotic images that are perceived to be threatening to family values etc. So a lot of people felt that they had to throw their support behind *Kids*, 100% and that was very disturbing to me because it was so deeply and profoundly Right wing in it's relationship to the politics of race and gender.

Particularly, I think, in terms of how the voyeuristic pornographic gaze of the middle aged white male filmmaker really utilizes the bodies of the female children and the small male children of color. Where those bodies become objectified in very traditional pornographic racist and sexist ways.

[Movie: Kids] *That's how I'm going to be up against your ass – I'm going to be like this.*

BELL HOOKS: I was so fascinated by how everyone would tell me they loved this film. And I'd say, well can you tell me the name of the lead woman character in the film and her sidekick? They never can say the names of the female characters. But they remember the names of the two white male stars, again, and so in a sense when we watch *Kids*, we are actually being asked again and again, by the camera, by the visual politics of this film to identify with those heterosexual misogynistic boys, the two white males who stand at the center of the film, largely because they are the people who speak, who have a voice.

[Movie: Kids] *Yo, excuse me, miss, can I borrow your hole? It'll only take a little bit, and I'll give it right back.*

-- You know what I noticed though? Bitches love to suck dick – it's like some secret passed up hobby or some shit.

BELL HOOKS: The girls speak only in that sort of pretend documentary moment, which was just a slick moment to make us think that there's gender equity in a film that goes on to never let them speak again.

[Movie: Kids] Will you just take it? You look sad, come here, will you just take it, just swallow it.

BELL HOOKS: Who allows one of them to be raped. I mean that moment of the rape in that movie, was such, I mean it was the kind of moment that at another historical moment men and women would have been outside theaters carrying signs saying, be prepared for this violent rape in the film, but that can become a kind of sexy coolness now what with the sort of domestication of S&M and sexualized violence, patriarchal sexualized violence. Because we have this young woman being violently raped with other people all around, so I mean the message of that is, if you go to the bad party, nice girl, you can be raped violently abused with people all around you and they are not going to care about your well-being. While the little white boy's raping her, he's saying all these tender sweet things.

And since we know that she's knocked out, she's not really awake, you don't here her voice at all, so you hear no protesting voice. If you close your eyes and listen to what's taking place, you would have no idea that a violent rape was taking place. Because it's all couched in seductive language.

These to me were so much of the conservative strategies underlying the transgressive surface of the film and it's just another sad moment where 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?

BELL HOOKS: Rap music is so diverse in its themes, its style, its content but when it become a vehicle to be talked about in mainstream news, the rap that gets in national news is always the rap music that perpetuates misogyny that is most obscene in it's lyrics and then this comes to stand for what rap is. Really its for me the perfect paradigm of colonialism, that is to say, we think of rap music as a little third world country, that young white consumers are able to go to and take out of it whatever they want. We would have to acknowledge that what young white consumers, primarily male, oftentimes suburban, most got energized by in rap music was misogyny, obscenity, pugilistic eroticism and therefore that form of rap began to make the largest sums of money.

The young men who create a lot of rap music are not naïve and they know that if they can make a million dollars talking about, you know, how they want to fuck a woman, and that will make tons of money.

[2 Live Crew Music video] I really want to be with you – I get hard after seeing you. How hard? Hard like a rock when you make that coochie pop.

BELL HOOKS: The kind of capitalist and market forces that are driving young male and female artists who produce rap, would suggest to me that they are going to go for the gusto, they are going to go for those millions.

[Text on Screen]

2 Live Crew album "As Nasty as They Want 2 Be" has sold in excess of 2 million copies.

Annual sales of rap music exceed \$700 million.

BELL HOOKS: I mean one of the things that's amazing to me is that there has been this demand somehow that rap musicians be more moral and more ethical than anybody else in American culture as they approach the business of creating a product and making money. And for me this is not to condone the sexism and the misogyny of rap but it is to say that this has to be seen in the larger framework of cultural production within capitalism in our society and that far from being different from multinational corporations and their processes of gaining greater and greater wealth one might argue you know that rap musicians, especially the success of a certain kind of misogynistic anti-feminist, anti-woman rap, is totally in line with, if you find a product, that gives you the maximum profit and reward, then push that product whether you actually believe what you're saying or not. It seems to me that we must first acknowledge that they are making strategic choices and we must then critique both those choices and their impact.

The damage in the long run to black life when pugilistic eroticism, when rape and assault become the defining aspects of erotic exchange between black females and males in youth culture, that fall out, that genocidal fallout is so much greater for the culture than the individual who becomes wealthy as a result of that, and the individuals

surrounding that individual who perpetuate their wealth, the larger corporations who produce that music and give it to the world. And that's precisely why it's become very meaningless to talk about is there an "authentic"? Is rap authentic? Because once you become part of the machinery of an advance technological capitalism system of production that is all out for the most profit, questions of authenticity become to me totally stupid and meaningless. Because it's already not anything that you can speak of any more as indigenous, it doesn't have a marginal location any more. So you can't talk about it as authentic to that marginal location because it's simply not there. It is "authentic" then to what it is.

COLOR CODING BLACK FEMALE BODIES

BELL HOOKS: Well I think that rap videos, like all major videos right now, have reinscribed the female body in very traditionally sexist pornographic, within the framework of the traditional sexist pornographic imaginary. To the extent that rap music or any kind of black music uses more black female bodies, the black female body comes into greater representation solely along the sexual terms that we have historically been represented within mass media. The hot pussy, the prostitute, the slut, the vulgar girl, the girl who is willing to do what the nice girls won't do, etc. All of these images and representations that have been a function of racist and sexist stereotypes get reproduced in rap videos, but the most noticeable aspect of the objectification of black female bodies in rap videos, for *black* women and men is the color caste system gets reintroduced and affirmed. It's quite rare to see darker skinned black females among the groups of women that are seen as sexually viable and desirable in most music videos whether rap or otherwise because in fact, it is the light skinned, preferably long haired, preferably straightened haired female who becomes once again reinscribed as the desirable object, this again is one of the tragic dimensions right now of race in America because more than ever before color caste systems are being overtly affirmed as through, you know, we didn't change this, we didn't fight against it, so now all we can do is embrace it and live out the consequences of it.

CONSUMING COMMODIFIED BLACKNESS

BELL HOOKS: I believe that American culture is obsessed with transgression. And to the degree that blackness remains a primary sign of transgression, one could talk about American culture and mainstream culture as being obsessed with blackness, but it is 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 a buyer. Anecdotally that to me is the difference between a young white male from the suburb who's consuming black music in the form of rap and who's wearing the same kind of clothes as other, you know, hip hop musicians but then in fact when he encounters a young black male on the streets feels the same racialized fear and demonizes that person as any white person who's had no contact with that music, so that there's no correlation often between the consumption of the commodity that is blackness and the culture from which that commodity comes, or that provides the resource base and that's no different again from us thinking of Third World countries.

There's a way in which white culture is perceived as too Wonder Bread right now, not edgy enough, not dangerous enough. Let's get some of those endangered species people to be exotic for us and it's really simply, I think, a more upscale version of primitivism, resurging. When blackness is the sign of transgression that is most desired it allow whiteness to remain static, to remain conservative, and it's 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 are wearing black clothes or listening to black music, they can be perceived as transgressive, as radical, 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 interest of white supremacy, the interest of capitalism and imperialism and I think that this is frightening because it's so deep and profound. It really suggests the way in which fantasy will I think, 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 and you can 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.