



# THE PHILOSOPHICAL HERITAGE OF BELL HOOKS' RADICAL FEMINISM AND CULTURAL CRITICISM

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*In Feminist theory: from margin to center, bell hooks puts into question the works by reformist feminists who happens to be mostly white, privileged women. She insists that these reformists do not address the plight of other oppressed women who were subjugated not only by their sex alone but by other factors such as race and class. Consequently, she proposes a cultural criticism that investigates the systems of domination in place through a disruption and deconstruction of cultural productions. This paper aims to critically evaluate hooks' radical feminism and cultural criticism, and show its philosophical heritage through an engagement with the key ideas of critical theory and postmodernism.*

Keywords: Bell Hooks; Critical Theory; Postfeminism; Postmodernism; Radical Feminism

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## INTRODUCING BELL HOOKS: RADICAL FEMINIST AND CULTURAL CRITIC

bell hooks, or Gloria Jean Watkins, is one of the icons of feminism who is readily accessible, but unfortunately not widely recognized and scrutinized in the philosophical canons. Her work covers a vast array of multidisciplinary theories collected in more than twenty books published over a span of almost forty years. hooks is one of the many theorists who gives emphasis to the development of feminist ideas. In fact, one of the reasons why she decided to use a pseudonym was for people to focus on ideas, rather than the personality of the idea generator. Her “choice to use a pseudonym was influenced by the longing, however utopian, to be among a community of feminist thinkers and activists who were seriously committed to intellectual development, to a dialectical exchange of ideas.”<sup>1</sup>

If one were to read hooks’ writings, one would notice that she refrains from using complicated philosophical jargon. Her language is crisp, simple, and straight to the point. This is probably one of the reasons why her work is not that widely studied in the academe. She stays true to the goal of her theorizing: that by making her works accessible; she hopes to reach a mass of individuals who do not have tertiary educations, who can barely read or write, who have been the victims of oppression and exploitation. Feminism, after all, is about ending sexist oppression, exploitation, and any form of oppression. As Maria del Guadalupe Davidson and George Yancy notes, hooks “enables oppressed peoples to envision counter-hegemonic actions, and in the process legitimates these actions.”<sup>2</sup>

From being a feminist theorist, bell hooks moves toward a thorough examination of culture later on. She aims to analyze the politics of domination through mass media representations. Like critical theorists and postmodernists who came before her, hooks goes beyond more than just theorizing. She steps into the confines of praxis, eventually proposing that a critique of culture entails something more than just mere analysis but also an implication of a transformation. In a way, what hooks puts forward is a radical feminist theory backed-up by a powerful cultural criticism that scrutinizes multi-faceted avenues in which layered oppressions take effect; avenues of oppressions that must be addressed. What this paper aims to do is to appraise and evaluate hooks’ radical outlook, and to show its philosophical heritage through an engagement with the key ideas of critical theory and postmodernism.

## FEMINIST CRITIQUE AND CRITICAL THEORY

Pamela Sue Anderson claims that “the first stage and crucial aspect of feminist philosophy consist in developing critiques of the existing philosophical canon.”<sup>3</sup> As such, these critiques put into question the default interpretations of the philosophical texts and how the canon has been defined. Furthermore, they aim to examine these “great works” developed by male, heterosexual, white, middle-class philosophers to gauge whether they embody gender-oppressive mechanisms. Their main contention is that these works have neglected “others” in crafting their ideas. Feminist critiques have shown that, in their theorizing, the great white, male philosophers have had sexist biases. It must therefore be the case that the “others”-the women, people of color, the LGBT community,

<sup>1</sup> bell hooks, *Outlaw culture: resisting representations*, (London: Routledge, 2006), 107.

<sup>2</sup> Maria del Guadalupe Davidson and George Yancy, eds., *Critical perspectives on bell hooks*, (London: Routledge, 2009), ix.

<sup>3</sup> Pamela Sue Anderson, “Feminism and philosophy”, in Sarah Gamble, ed., *The Routledge companion to feminism and postfeminism*, (London: Routledge, 2006), 117-118.





the proletariat, to mention a few, should also have a say in theorizing.

In the process of this critique, what struck first-wave feminists is the pervasiveness of the oppression and subjugation of women in society. Although later feminists stepped out of the confines of sexist oppression alone, it still remains that one of the main claims of feminist philosophers is that women are oppressed. From the first-wave feminists to the third-wave feminists, one may not be able to get past a the topic without encountering the word, “oppression.” It is necessary however, to note that feminists are not the only ones who concern themselves with the problem of oppression. Like feminist theorists, critical theorists have brought to our attention society’s systems of exploitation and domination.

As some authors have characterized its aims, critical theory...

...aims to bring to consciousness an awareness of capitalist exploitation, bureaucratic domination and to create a popular demand for liberation. It also aims to bring to our consciousness oppression of which we may or may not have been aware, and it calls for criticism of life to resist and transform the existing systems of domination and exploitation . . . the fundamental aim of critical theory is dismantling existing forms of oppression.<sup>4</sup>

Having been situated in an era proliferated by world wars, the main concern of critical theorists was to eliminate subjugation in society. To critique existing systems of domination, at the same time being challenged to come up with the truth of human existence, critical theorists attempt to “change the world via a critique of established reality,” or the status quo.<sup>5</sup> To merely describe observations on human reality does not sit well with critical theory. A critical theoretical

<sup>4</sup> Tim May and Jason Powell, *Situating social theory*, (London: McGraw-Hill Education, 2008), 44.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

analysis seeks to make the world a more humane place to live in. Critical theory stems from social theory. Social theory, however, is not always critical. Thus, there is a need to differentiate social theory from social criticism. Social criticism is the venue in which society and critics reevaluate “existing values, practices, and norms that cause or perpetuate harmful inequalities.”<sup>6</sup>

According to Martha Nussbaum, social critics should be able to bring changes so that human beings in a society may live fulfilling lives. She claims that there are aspects or values “universally recognized as being essential to human. Those values include the ability to meet one’s basic physical needs, but they also include the ability to participate in decision making about matters that affect one’s life.”<sup>7</sup> What differentiates critical theory from other social theories is praxis. “Praxis refers to the ideal of conscious practical action: that is making the critique of alienation speak for popular needs leading to concrete actions to transform social relations.”<sup>8</sup>

This idea of praxis and the need for a critical evaluation of society neatly juxtaposes with bell hooks’ definition of cultural criticism. Her approach, however, is pedagogical. In her book entitled, *Outlaw culture: resisting representations*, hooks talks of the “union of theory and practice . . . that challenges systems of domination: racism, sexism, and class elitism.”<sup>9</sup> As an educator, hooks defines cultural criticism as that which:

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

<sup>6</sup> Brooke A. Ackerly, *Political theory and feminist social criticism*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 12-13.

<sup>7</sup> Nussbaum, Martha C. “Human Functioning and Social Justice: In Defense of Aristotelian Essentialism.” *Political Theory* 20, no. 2 (1992): 202-46.

<sup>8</sup> May and Powell, op cit., 44.

<sup>9</sup> hooks, op cit.,3.





a condition for reasserting the relationship between agency, power, and struggle.<sup>10</sup>

Allied to critical theory, cultural criticism likewise proposes a multicultural democracy in which the goal is to have a freedom of movement that is available to everyone. In this way, both critical theory and cultural criticism are forms of social theory that encourage the evaluation and review of existing values, rules and norms that perpetuate oppressions.

The beginnings of critical theory can be traced to its founders Max Horkheimer, Friedrich Pollock, Herbert Marcuse and Theodor Adorno, collectively known as The Frankfurt School. In the 1930s, when the Institute of Social Research was put up in Frankfurt, one of the most vibrant forms of philosophical movements was born. Max Horkheimer, in his inaugural address as the director, established the direction of the Institute, which paved the way for a new approach to social theory. From a “politically engaged empirical social science” to a “new, philosophically informed, interdisciplinary social science.”<sup>11</sup>

According to Horkheimer, one must go beyond the mere gathering of empirical facts, which is the standard approach of sociologists. As the critical theory scholar, Fred Rush notes, “Without philosophically informed social theory of the right sort, whole ranges of phenomena might be sealed off from investigation and the potential political impact of the research diminished to that extent.”<sup>12</sup> The wrong sort of social theory would simply stop at the research without looking at the political implications of such findings. The Frankfurt School made a critique of social theory at that time.

In *Between Philosophy and Social science*, Horkheimer argues that:

If social-philosophical thought concerning the relationship of individual and society, the meaning of culture, the foundation of the development of community, the overall structure of social life –in short, concerning the great and fundamental questions –is left behind as (so to speak) the dregs that remain in the reservoir of social-scientific problems after taking out those questions that can be advanced in concrete investigations, social philosophy may well perform social functions (such as that of transfiguring and mystifying reality), but its intellectual fruitfulness would have been forfeited.<sup>13</sup>

Horkheimer insists that social theory must be critical. By critical, he means that theorizing should do more than just elucidating existing social situations. This gives birth to critical theory as social theory. To engage in critical theory is not to be merely descriptive, it is also to instigate “social change by providing knowledge of the forces of social inequality that can, in turn, inform political action aimed at emancipation.”<sup>14</sup> Another characteristic of critical theory is the inclusion of mass media in theory and study. Being critical of social situations involves the evaluation of communication media. Critical theory covers the systematic investigation of “mass communication in modern societies, of their technocratic culture industry and of the relationship between popular culture and art.”<sup>15</sup> Significantly, however, the Frankfurt School condemns mass culture. Mass culture is considered as the “last decadent gasp of a culture in decay.”<sup>16</sup>

It is important to note, however, that there have been efforts made to reevaluate popular culture and to challenge existing views of it. “Popular

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>11</sup> Fred Rush, “Conceptual foundations of critical theory, In his edited *The Cambridge companion to critical theory*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 8-9.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Max Horkheimer, *Between philosophy and social science: selected early writings*, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995), 8.

<sup>14</sup> Rush, op cit., 9.

<sup>15</sup> Dani Cavallaro, *Critical and cultural theory*, ( London: The Athlone Press, 2001), 80.

<sup>16</sup> Suzanna Danuta Walters, *Material girls: Making sense of feminist cultural theory*, (California: University of California Press, 1995), 21.





culture came to be seen as a legitimate area of social analysis that was not simply reducible to a variety of brainwashing metaphors and terms of denigration.”<sup>17</sup> Incidentally, “the theorists of the Frankfurt school were among the first to provide a critical approach to mass culture.”<sup>18</sup>

Also a member of the Frankfurt school, Theodor Adorno, in his well-known article entitled, “The culture industry reconsidered,” talks of mass culture or the culture industry. He defines the culture industry as “something like a culture that arises spontaneously from the masses themselves, the contemporary form of popular art.”<sup>19</sup> He states that not just because a certain film or other forms of mass culture touch the lives of individuals, it is a guarantee of quality. Examples of these media would be “pocket novels, films off the rack, family television shows rolled out into serials and hit parades, advice to the lovelorn and horoscope columns.” Significantly, “the advice to be gained from manifestations of the culture industry is vacuous, banal or worse, and the behavior patterns are shamelessly conformist.”<sup>20</sup> Unfortunately, the concepts that the culture industry promotes, which foster conformist ideas, are not questioned or analyzed despite their apparent lack of substance. Adorno insists that one’s freedom is halted when one subscribes to the culture industry – a person’s consciousness is replaced with conformity. Accordingly, the culture industry “impedes the development of autonomous, independent individuals who judge and decide consciously for themselves.”<sup>21</sup>

Adorno claims that mass media is a tool for mass deception that keeps the masses contented with and in the status quo. The culture industries use

their productions to stage a sophisticated form of “ideological indoctrination, using entertainment to sugarcoat the ideological content of oppression while eroding cultural standards in order to quell any forms of expression which might contest the given order.”<sup>22</sup>

Adorno argues that:

The very term mass media, specially honed for the culture industry, already shifts the accent onto harmless terrain. Neither is it a question of primary concern for the masses, nor of the techniques of communication as such, but of the spirit which sufflates them, the master’s voice. The culture industry misuses its concern for the masses in order to duplicate, reinforce, and strengthen their mentality, which it presumes is given and unchangeable.<sup>23</sup>

Adorno confirms that mass media influences a person’s way of thinking. Critical theorists contend that through the culture industry, the manipulation of the masses’ consciousness is made in order to keep the hold of current social, economic and political institutions. Ideally, this would be “very useful for those at the top – those who have great wealth and who control the dominant institutions found in capitalist societies –the bourgeoisie.”<sup>24</sup> Cultural critics, in the same manner, have their roots in such characteristic of critical theory as they involve media analysis and mass media studies in their theory-building.

It must be noted that Adorno favors art over popular culture. He asserts that art leads to a more progressive society as opposed to mass culture, as “the culture industry perpetually cheats its consumers of what it perpetually promises for the promise is illusory: all it actually confirms is that the real point will never be reached, that

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Stephen Eric Bronner and Douglas Kellner, eds. “Introduction,” in their *Critical theory and society: A reader*, (New York: Psychology Press, 1989), 10.

<sup>19</sup> Adorno, Theodor W., and Anson G. Rabinbach, “Culture industry reconsidered,” *New German Critique* 6 (1975): 12-19.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 15-16.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>22</sup> As noted in Bronner and Kellner, op cit., 10.

<sup>23</sup> Adorno and Rabinbach, op cit., 19.

<sup>24</sup> Arthur Asa Berger, *Cultural criticism: a primer of key concepts*, (California: Sage Publications, 1995), 45.





the diner must be satisfied with the menu.”<sup>25</sup> Walter Benjamin, though, another proponent of the Frankfurt School claims that mass culture destroys art. Mass production is a “means of destroying the original artwork’s putative uniqueness, or aura, and hence releasing it into wider and more accessible cultural domains.”<sup>26</sup>

For the political philosopher, Raymond Geuss, critical theory “is a reflective theory, which gives agents a kind of knowledge inherently productive of enlightenment and emancipation.”<sup>27</sup> Critical theory has three features: it should guide human action, it should be coherent and consistent, and, it should be reflective; “that is, critics should be able to criticize the values, practices, and norms of a society according to principles which are themselves open to criticism.”<sup>28</sup>

## FEMINIST WAVES AND POSTMODERNISM

Feminist theorists, however, criticize this definition of critical theory. In order for a critical theory to be critical, there has to be more than the criteria of actionability, consistency, and self-reflection. It should wrestle with the struggles and wishes of real people. “Real people” refer to the significantly oppressed groups such as the poor, the outcasts, etc. On the contrary, however, critical theory not only neglects to wrestle with the struggles and wishes of real people, but with the struggles and wishes of women as well. While critical theory has failed to be “critical”, feminist theorists have “paid attention to the practical and critical import of (political) theory for the struggles and wishes of women.”<sup>29</sup>

Third-world feminist, Brooke Ackerly proposes to add the following as features to the philosophical definition of critical theory: it must follow a methodology intended to be sensitive to the reality of an imperfect world where power inequalities enable coercion and potential exploitation to silence some within a society and to impede social criticism and change. Furthermore, values, practices and norms of a society must also be critiqued, “this may require a critical voice as representative of silent voices” (by creating a safe place for those who are exploited or excluded), and finally there should be “no constraints on the origins or qualities” of the critic. It should require “multiple critics from a variety of origins and critical perspectives.” In short, critical theory should transform from merely “an intellectual project to the practice of social criticism of values, practices, and norms in the real, imperfect world.”<sup>30</sup>

Since most of the Frankfurt School theorists were male, white, and middle class, social critique tends to be centered on the “same” perspectives whilst excluding “other” voices. Simone de Beauvoir points out in *The second sex* that “representation of the world, like the world itself, is the work of men; they describe it from their own point of view, which they confuse with the absolute truth.”<sup>31</sup> As such, the production of any theory tends to become biased and fails to “take into account the subjective experiences of women... Many feminist critics argue that social science methodologies are masculinist and biased in various ways toward male perspectives.” Eventually, this bias leads “to the maintenance of the status quo and the domination of women by men.”<sup>32</sup>

<sup>25</sup> As cited in Cavallaro, op cit, 81.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Raymond Geuss, *The idea of a critical theory*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 2.

<sup>28</sup> Ackerly, op cit., 26.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 28-29.

<sup>31</sup> As cited in Cecily Devereux, “New woman, new world: maternal feminism and the new imperialism in the white settler colonies,” In *Women’s studies international forum*, vol. 22, no. 2, pp. 175-184. Pergamon, 1999.

<sup>32</sup> Berger, op cit., 30.



Aside from pointing out the above prejudices when it comes to theorizing, feminist critics also stress the importance of reviewing mass media images from the point of view of a woman. They seek to “enlighten ordinary women who... indiscriminately and passively absorb these (mass media) images and therefore suffer from a false consciousness...” It is “the role of the feminist is to prove herself equal to demythologizing the powerful and ever-changing myths about the female self and nature perpetuated in the mass media and other state apparatuses.”<sup>33</sup>

Throughout the 1960s and the 1970s, feminist critics scrutinize popular media culture. The challenge of these thinkers was to examine misrepresentations of women in media. In this period, “feminists have established a body of reading strategies, analytical frameworks, and theoretical models for better understanding the crucial role that media perform in the reproduction of gender inequality.” Popular media then began to be the “preferred site of social and political struggle.”<sup>34</sup> These critics brought upon themselves the task to examine portrayals of women as to whether they were accurate “ways of seeing” women or not:

Second-wave feminist critics often employed . . . the crude hypodermic needle model of media effect that relies on the assumptions that mass-media imagery consists of transparent, unrealistic messages about women whose meanings are clear-cut and straightforward and girls and women passively and indiscriminately absorb these messages and meanings as (wrong) lessons about “real life.”<sup>35</sup>

Accordingly, this became what has been known as the ‘images of women’ debate, which revolve around the idea that “media socialize women/girls into consuming and accepting

false images of femininity and traditional sex roles.”<sup>36</sup> By traditional, this would mean roles that reinforce home or family life. Renowned reformist feminist, Betty Friedan, in her *The feminine mystique*, criticizes representations in advertising that boxes women into persons that desire to purchase household items. She believes that there is a conscious manipulation to portray women as perpetual housewives.<sup>37</sup>

Naomi Wolf, on the other hand, claims that the period of the feminine mystique is over. Society is now plagued with “the beauty myth.” She notes that “As women released themselves from the feminine mystique of domesticity, the beauty myth took over its lost ground, expanding as it waned to carry on its work of social control.”<sup>38</sup> It is notable though that from liberal feminists like, Mary Wollstonecraft to postfeminists like, Naomi Wolf, women’s quest for femininity and beauty is often constituted as a problem and a major cause of women’s oppression.

For Wolf, “there is a secret underlife poisoning our (women’s) freedom infused with notions of beauty, it is a dark vein of self-hatred, physical obsessions, terror or aging, and dread of lost control.”<sup>39</sup> This, in turn, is a milestone in the feminist critique of culture, wherein the middle class white wives and mothers were discontented with their dispositions because they wanted to develop personal interests and ambitions outside of their home lives. As Wolf further claims, “as soon as a woman’s primary social value could no longer be defined as the attainment of virtuous domesticity, the beauty myth redefined it was the attainment of virtuous beauty.”<sup>40</sup> Through media, women were invited and encouraged to

<sup>33</sup> Stéphanie Genz and Benjamin Brabon, *Postfeminism: cultural texts and theories*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), 21.

<sup>34</sup> Watkins, S. Craig, and Rana A. Emerson. “Feminist media criticism and feminist media practices.” *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 571, no. 1 (2000): 152.

<sup>35</sup> Genz and Brabon, op cit., 21.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Betty Friedan, *The feminine mystique*, (New York: WW Norton & Company, 2010).

<sup>38</sup> Naomi Wolf, *The beauty myth: How images of beauty are used against women*, (New York: Random House, 1991), 250.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 257.



purchase food, drug and fashion products in order to attain beauty. It leads women to believe that men will want to possess women who embody this certain type of beauty.

Second-wave feminist critics were later challenged by postfeminists, claiming that their brand of feminism was only for “an elitist feminist club.” Their awareness-raising was aimed at “ordinary” women, but who were the ordinary women anyway? There was a “silent majority of women” who were neglected in their theorizing. At the same time, feminists became aware that issues of representation should not only be centered on white women or black women alone. Through a supposed rise of a vibrant black feminist perspective, it was believed that other women should also be part of the feminist discourse on media criticism, particularly Asians and Latin Americans. This is the era of postfeminism where “it is no longer possible for contemporary critics to adopt a binary framework that sets up a contrast between feminism and popular culture, real feminism and fictional feminism.”<sup>41</sup>

Most feminist media critics would term themselves as doing cultural criticism rather than critical theory. Cultural criticism “offers a multidisciplinary approach to society, which combines perspectives drawn from political economy, sociology, cultural theory, philosophy, anthropology, and history.”<sup>42</sup> It is a hodgepodge of different fields all rolled into one. It is more of an activity and not a discipline per se. Cultural critics apply cultural criticism concepts and theories “in varying combinations and permutations, to the elite arts, popular culture, everyday life, and a host of related topics. It is the meeting point of various related or sometimes even unrelated fields. It is characterized as...

...a multidisciplinary, interdisciplinary undertaking... and use of ideas from, a variety of disciplines. Cultural criticism can involve literary and aesthetic theory and criticism, philosophical thought, media analysis, popular cultural criticism, interpretive theories and disciplines (semiotics), psychoanalytic theory, Marxist theory, sociological and anthropological theory, and so on), communication studies, mass media research, and various other means of making sense of contemporary (and not so contemporary) culture and society.<sup>43</sup>

Some of the famous contemporary cultural critics include Michel Foucault and Jean Baudrillard. Foucault examined cultural power relationships through “discourses.” Power is not simply a repressive tool, but a complex structure of forces. Consequently, Foucault tried to foster a study of other texts that are not necessarily given attention to by traditional critics such as women, homosexuals and other minorities. For example, Foucault talks of the continual variations of power in his *The history of sexuality*. He claims that “we must not look for who has the power in the order of sexuality (men, adults, parents, doctors) and who is deprived of it (women, adolescents, children, patients); nor for who has the right to know and who is forced to remain ignorant.” Simply reversing the relationship of the order of power is questionable since power relationships are ever-changing. According to Foucault, “relations of power-knowledge are not static forms of distribution, they are “matrices of transformations.” Thus, for him, “where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power... one is always ‘inside’ power, there is no ‘escaping’ it.”<sup>44</sup>

On the other hand, Baudrillard explores the consumer society and recognizes the cultural impact of consumer products’ sign-value. Baudrillard’s concept of the sign-value proposes

<sup>41</sup> Genz and Barbon, op cit., 25.

<sup>42</sup> Bronner and Kellner, op cit., 1-2.

<sup>43</sup> Berger 1995, 2-3.

<sup>44</sup> Michel Foucault, *The history of sexuality: an introduction*, (New York: Vintage, 1990), 99.







that consumers “fall into the trap of confusing the ideology of consumption with consumption itself.” He comes up with a “conspiracy” theory of sorts, which systematizes the transition of the logic of consumption by the inclusion of the sign value. Consequently, the commodity itself transitions from “use-value and exchange value to sign-value (includes symbol reflecting the logic of a gift), and sign (reflecting the logic of status).”<sup>45</sup>

The sign-value, therefore, connotes the commodity’s relevance to the consumer. One no longer purchases the commodity itself, but the sign-value attached to it as well. Examples of sign-values include advertising, mass media and other cultural productions related to the commodity. Later on, Baudrillard claims that everyone already lives in a hyperreal world, wherein communication technologies simulate experiences that are more “real” than real.

These ideas are in synergy with hooks’ ideas. hooks claims that the aforementioned elites fail to integrate the concerns of other marginalized groups, particularly that of the black people. Their theory is basically exclusionary. While they argue to acknowledge difference and marginality, the French theorists fail to integrate the voice of the truly marginalized. Consequently, “radical postmodernist practice, most powerfully conceptualized as a ‘politics of difference’, should incorporate the voices of displaced, marginalized, exploited, and oppressed black people.” Moreover:

It is sadly ironic that the contemporary discourse which talks the most about heterogeneity, the decentered subject, declaring breakthroughs that allow recognition of Otherness, still directs its critical voice primarily to a specialized audience that shares a common language rooted in the very master narratives

it claim to challenge. If radical postmodernist thinking is to have a transformative impact, then a critical break with the notion of ‘authority’ as ‘mastery over’ must not simply be a rhetorical device. It must be reflected in habits of being, including styles of writing as well as chosen subject matter.<sup>46</sup>

hooks, however, defends postmodernism. She claims that she was not so much bothered by postmodernism but by the “conventional language used when it is written or talked about and by those who speak it.” She finds herself “on the outside of the discourse looking in.” A field dominated by white, male intellectuals, hooks “appreciates” postmodernism but is critical of it. “The failure to recognize a critical black presence... in most scholarship and writing on postmodernism compels a black reader, particularly a black female reader, to interrogate her interest in a subject...”<sup>47</sup> By challenging universal and static notions of identity in mass culture and mass consciousness, hooks acknowledges that postmodernism can pave the way for a new “construction of self and the assertion of agency.” Radical postmodernism “calls attention to its ability to cross boundaries of class, gender and race which can lead to the recognition of common commitments and serve as a basis for solidarity.”<sup>48</sup>

In contrast, some theorists question the “jargon” used by the postmodern cultural critics.<sup>49</sup> Since the aim of these critics is to make their work influence media practitioners, most often than not, their scholarly works are not accessible to many people. Accordingly, in trying to comprehend cultural criticism, very few people would read or even understand such works.

<sup>45</sup> As cited in Douglas Kellner, *Baudrillard: a critical reader*, (Cambridge, Mass.: Basil Blackwell Inc., 1995), 125.

<sup>46</sup> bell hooks, *Salvation: Black people and love*, (New York: Harper Perennial, 2001), 248.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Ana Brooks, *Postfeminisms: feminism, cultural theory and cultural forms*, (London: Routledge, 1997), 108.

<sup>49</sup> See, for example, Brooks, op cit.





## BELL HOOKS' CULTURAL CRITICISM THROUGH RADICAL (POST)FEMINISM: CONTINUING THE CRITIQUE

hooks has been dubbed as one of the most accessible cultural critics of our time. As Peter McLaren and Nathalia E. Jaramillo note, "What distinguishes hooks' writing the most is her discussion of feminism as a form of praxis--against sexism and against encompassing systems of oppression--that calls for a shift in the private and public domains of social life."<sup>50</sup> hooks combines her feminist and cultural backgrounds in her cultural criticism theory that analyzes a web of oppressive factors. At the same time, hooks, as a representative of the postfeminist paradigm, looks at pop culture as a basic venue to take a look at such oppressive systems. In this way, she is a cultural critic.

According to the *The Norton anthology of theory and criticism*, a cultural critique "is less concerned with elaborating conditions of possibility, as is Kantian critique, than with investigating and criticizing values, practices, categories, and representations embedded in cultural texts and surrounding institutions."<sup>51</sup> Incidentally, it might appear as if it is more of an advocacy rather than a "disinterested, objective inquiry." In this case, hooks' cultural criticism delves on the investigation and the critique of values, practices and representations in pop culture. Cultural critics have given mass, popular and everyday materials their due attention in the recent decades. Some of the media that have been the focus of these critiques are television, cinema, advertising, rock music, magazines, minority literatures and popular literature (thrillers, science fiction, romances, westerns,

Gothic fiction). In particular, the production, distribution and consumption of these discourses are the cornerstones of the critique.

hooks' brand of cultural criticism uses her feminist theory as the basis of her critique. She investigates the systems of domination that are reinforced in certain discourses (in this case, pop culture). Cultural criticism is "a practice of critique and analysis that would disrupt and even deconstruct those cultural productions that were designed to promote and reinforce domination."<sup>52</sup> And her main question is: "What are the representations and images that show racist and sexist stereotypes?" Her main issues are on representation "as it determines who gets to speak to, with and for us about culture."<sup>53</sup>

With regard to popular culture, hooks contends that this is where the future of the liberation struggle lies:

It's exciting to think, write, talk about, and create art that reflects passionate engagement with popular culture, because this may very well be "the" central future location of resistance struggle, a meeting place where new and radical happenings can occur.<sup>54</sup>

hooks specifies that a cultural critique is not always negative. She distinguishes a hostile critique which trashes and a critique that illuminates and enriches one's understanding. For her, "Critiques that offer critical insight without serving as a barrier to appreciation are necessary."<sup>55</sup> Cultural criticism, though, must have a goal. In this case, since hooks is committed to radical cultural politics, she claims that theoretical paradigms should be offered so as to contextualize political strategies.

<sup>50</sup> Peter McLaren and Nathalia E. Jaramillo, "Borderlines: bell hooks and the Pedagogy of Revolutionary Change." In *Critical Perspectives on bell hooks*, pp. 31-47, Routledge, 2009.

<sup>51</sup> Vincent B. Leitch and William E. Cain, eds, *The Norton anthology of theory and criticism*, (New York: WW Norton & Company, 2010).

<sup>52</sup> bell hooks, *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics*, (Boston: South and Press, 1990), 3.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>54</sup> hooks, *Salvation*, 248.

<sup>55</sup> hooks, *Yearning*, 5.





The critique of images or representations in culture must “move” the people towards liberation. hooks’ cultural critiques are delivered through her “writings, teachings and habits of being” and this in turn are strategies that “enable colonized folks to decolonize their minds and actions, thereby promoting the insurrection of subjugated knowledge.”<sup>56</sup> She admits though that the practice of such critique has not been the focus of academic study. At the same time, the body of writing of critical cultural analysis apparently cannot keep pace with the proliferation of images.

Cultural criticism should be in no way engaged in just because it is “trendy.” When critics write about certain materials just because it is trendy with no link whatsoever to a liberation struggle, it defeats the purpose of the critique. A critic must be aware as to whether or not their work supports or maintains racist or sexist domination. As hooks notes, cultural criticism must be “linked with a concern for transforming oppressive structures of domination.”<sup>57</sup> The past is also vital in the process of critique. Accordingly, there must be “an effort to remember... where one is able to redeem and reclaim the past, legacies of pain, suffering and triumph in ways that transform present reality.”<sup>58</sup>

The field of cultural criticism has been critiqued as well. The main contention is that cultural criticism seems to put pop culture on a pedestal and knock the canon out of its place. With regard to involving political concerns in the discipline, there tend to be a bias to pay close attention to specific factors such as race, class or gender—rather than having a close reading of that which is being critiqued per se. In hooks’ cultural criticism, is the political struggle a by-

product of the critique or does the desire for social change influence the critique?

bell hooks is a representative of postfeminism, which is a reaction to the modernist or reformist conception of feminism. Specifically, postfeminism was a reaction to 1970s feminism. Postfeminism is a critical position in relation to the feminism of women’s liberation, signifying both the achievements of and challenges for modern feminist politics. One of the main questions posed was: “why should 1970s feminism have a copyright on feminism?” Incidentally, postfeminism can be considered as a movement of feminist pluralization and diversification; making room for a more diverse “we.” Postfeminism is interpreted in the academic context as the “intersection of postmodernism/multiculturalism and feminism”:

While postmodernist critics destabilize the idea of a universal and unified subject (including feminist subjects), multiculturalist feminists concentrate on material exclusions and examine how gender is constructed across a range of identity markers, beyond the limits of Western, white, heterosexual and middle-class female experience...<sup>59</sup>

In her 1981 book, *Ain’t I a woman : Black women and feminism*, hooks declares that modern feminist theory is inadequate and all women should be able to identify with and feel that she is a part of it.<sup>60</sup> hooks was a product of her time. As Beverly Guy-Sheftall documents, “in the 80s, women of color began to critique women’s studies and gender-focused curriculum projects for their relative lack of attention to questions of race, ethnicity, class and cultural differences.”<sup>61</sup> And as Ann Brooks notes, “Second wave feminism (i.e., modernist/reformist feminism) has neglected

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 8.  
<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 12.  
<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 147.

<sup>59</sup> Genz and Brabon, op cit. 28-30.  
<sup>60</sup> bell hooks, *Ain’t I a woman: Black women and feminism*, (Boston, Mass.: South End Press, 1981).  
<sup>61</sup> Beverly Guy-Sheftall, “Forty Years of Women’s Studies,” *Ms. Magazine online. Spring Issue.* <http://www.msmagazine.com/womensstudies/FourtyYears.asp> (2009).





the lived experience of racism. This neglect renders second-wave feminism's theoretical framework and categories inappropriate and its practices problematic."<sup>62</sup> hooks was instrumental in providing what Guy-Sheftall calls "a monolithic conception of women's experiences" that brought forth a "new scholarship on gender and equality."<sup>63</sup>

Following this line of thinking, women of color and minorities encouraged the recognition of their differences from the status quo (most often than not, a white bourgeois woman). Black women's experiences of oppression and exploitation, for example, cannot be likened to that of white women's experiences. This period has introduced the social construction of gender and its intersections with race, class, ethnicity and sexuality as a major focus of inquiry. hooks claims that although modern feminist thought acknowledges a "common oppression" amongst all women, this is not the case. She writes:

It was primarily bourgeois white women, both liberal and radical in perspective, who professed belief in the notion of common oppression. The idea of "common oppression" was a false and corrupt platform disguising and mystifying the true nature of women's varied and complex social reality. Women are divided by sexist attitudes, racism, class privilege, and a host of other prejudices.<sup>64</sup>

Unfortunately, as hooks further notes, "feminist writings by women of color are often ignored." hooks wrote such concerns in an era wherein "many white women act as though there is no need for women of color to play a central role in the making of feminist political theory."<sup>65</sup> This phenomenon can be traced to as far back as the 1800s when a black woman, Sojourner Truth, spoke up in a convention of women's rights.

<sup>62</sup> Brooks, *op cit.*, 17.

<sup>63</sup> Guy-Sheftall, *op cit.*

<sup>64</sup> bell hooks, *Feminist theory: from margin to center.* (Boston, Mass.: South End Press, 1984), 126.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*

Sojourner Truth claims that despite her talk on women's rights, she could not relate to the plight of these women (who happened to be middle class, privileged and white). In her speech, she talked about how "white women's situations and oppression are different from those of black women." In the fight of women for equality with men, there has been an obvious neglect of the woman of color's situation. Sojourner Truth states:

That man over there says that women need to be helped into carriages, and lifted over ditches, and to have the best place everywhere. Nobody ever helps me into carriages, or over mud-puddles, or gives me any best place! And ain't I a woman? Look at me! Look at my arm! I have ploughed and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me! And ain't I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man - when I could get it - and bear the lash as well! And ain't I a woman? I have borne thirteen children, and seen most all sold off to slavery, and when I cried out with my mother's grief, none but Jesus heard me! And ain't I a woman?<sup>66</sup>

As one of her main inspirations, hooks pays homage to Sojourner Truth in her famed 1981 book. Her homage resonates a call for us to continuously be critical of the oppressive structures of culture. Thus, to do a critique on hooks' cultural criticism is to contribute to the progression of feminist theory. To have an "interrogative stance" on feminist theories "could thus be read as a healthy rewriting of feminism, a sign that the women's movement is continuously in process, transforming and changing itself." "To do a study on postfeminists is one of the most pressing current concerns of academic feminism."<sup>67</sup>

At the same time, doing a critical evaluation would encourage more dialogues and discourses on hooks' work. One of the recent books which

<sup>66</sup> As cited in Corona Brezina, *Sojourner Truth's "ain't I a woman?" speech: A primary source investigation,* (The Rosen Publishing Group, 2005).

<sup>67</sup> Genz and Brabon, *op cit.*, 16-17.





comments on bell hooks' works is the book entitled, *Critical perspectives on bell hooks*. The writers examine hooks' theories and provide clarifications and criticisms to further improve the discourse on hooks. As editors write:

The way to show respect for someone's contributions is to take them seriously--to think publicly about the text; to affirm what is powerful and illuminating, to engage in the creative act of supportive criticism; to understand that critical work is a fully collective enterprise where such criticism is to be welcomed as part of the dialogue that leads to better analysis and wiser actions.<sup>68</sup>

More studies on cultural criticism are also called for. As hooks notes, with the mass media overpowering other sources of knowledge, "cultural criticism can be and is a vital location for the exchange of knowledge, or the formation of new epistemologies." Cultural studies calls to instigate social change both in and outside of academic circles. Since popular culture is readily accessible to the public and to the masses, it becomes a "powerful way to share knowledge . . . across differences, in an oppositional and subversive way."<sup>69</sup> hooks combines both feminism and cultural studies in her theory-building which would evolve alongside the evolution of society.

As Rory Dicker and Alison Piepmeier claim, there is a need for a feminism that is:

Dedicated to a radical, transformative political vision, a feminism that does not shy away from hard work but recognizes that changing the world is a difficult and necessary task, a feminism that utilizes the new technologies of the Internet, the playful world of fashion, and the more clear-cut activism of protest marches, a feminism that can engage with issues as diverse as women's sweatshop labor in global factories and violence against women expressed in popular music.<sup>70</sup>

To tackle a woman of color's works in feminist theory is tackling a marginalized topic in a marginalized field in philosophy. hooks' cultural criticism theory benefits not only feminist theorists but the feminist movement as well. "Perplexing and troubling for some, postfeminism is also a compelling and provocative feature of contemporary culture, society, academia and politics that demands our critical attention and scrutiny."<sup>71</sup>

Similarly:

Feminism needs to make explicit its theoretical frameworks and it needs to do so precisely in order to re-conceptualize the relation between theory and practice. That is, feminism needs to debate which are the better ways of understanding how gender relations operate, and how those relations can be challenged most effectively.<sup>72</sup>

An ongoing and progressive critique of feminist ideas would encourage a revision of mindsets that could eventually lead to the eradication of forms of oppression. There are three main reasons why hooks' cultural criticism is relevant to the field of philosophy: (1) it contributes to the critique of feminist theory, (2) it enriches critical and cultural theory, while emphasizing the importance of eliminating oppression and transformation of culture through a feminist point of view, and (3) it improves the discourse on cultural criticism in general. Just as social critics must be critical of their own criticism, scholars must also be critical of other critics' criticism.

<sup>68</sup> del Guadalupe Davidson and Yancy, op cit.

<sup>69</sup> hooks, *Outlaw culture*, 4-7.

<sup>70</sup> Rory Dicker and Alison Piepmeier, eds., *Catching a wave: Reclaiming feminism for the 21st century*, (Northeastern University Press, 2016), 3.

<sup>71</sup> Genz and Brabon, op cit., 9.

<sup>72</sup> Sarah Ahmed, *Differences that matter: feminist theory and postmodernism.*, (Cambridge University Press, 1998), 17.





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