

Organizing bell hooks' frameworks for interrogating representations

Hazel T. Biana

Abstract

The feminist bell hooks is a staunch critic of sexist, racist, and classist media representations. Despite this, hooks has been called out for being unscholarly and disorganized in her cultural criticism. Through a close reading of hooks' works, this paper attempts to make sense of and organize her cultural criticism frameworks toward a possible system for a critical discourse analysis. Hooks' works are taken apart to examine how the parts fit together to understand the order, interventions, and intellectual motivations of her methods. Certain processes by which these frameworks may be used by scholars and critics for interrogating sex, race, class, and other intersectional representations are also discussed.

Keywords: bell hooks, representations, cultural criticism, sexist oppression

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Introduction

With decades of work on feminist theory and cultural criticism, Gloria Jean Watkins, or bell hooks, is known as a staunch critic of media representations. In hooks' books, essays, and interviews, she dissects various representations of Black women and men in literary works, movies, songs, and other media. As a feminist cultural critic, she critiques values, practices, and representations in cultural texts, thereby investigating the systems of domination that reinforce sexism, racism, and classism in society. From scrutinies of Beyonce's album to Hillary Clinton's standpoints, hooks challenges cultural norms by inciting awareness about White Supremacist Capitalist Patriarchy.

A feminist first, a cultural critic second, hooks combines revolutionary feminist theory and cultural criticism in her works. In two books which highlight the foundation of her feminist theory, *Ain't I a woman* (1981) and *Feminist theory: from margin to center* (2000a), hooks stresses that feminism is not just about the fight for equality between women and men but a stand against any form of oppression. She claims that eliminating oppressions may only be possible with the transformation of culture through the critique of and continued discourse on pop culture and representations. After all, popular culture is where pedagogy is; and with the advent of other forms of media, it is where resistance begins and happens. Hooks likewise comes up with theories and examples for such critiques in her succeeding works on cultural criticism such as *Reel to real: race, sex, and class at the movies* (1996b), *Outlaw culture: resisting representations* (2006) and *Black looks: race and representation* (2014a).

Various thinkers use diverse styles and methods in interpreting, understanding, and finding meaning in media, popular culture, and other venues. Cultural criticism is a hodgepodge of disciplines that leads to a better understanding of culture and society. In a primer for cultural criticism, Arthur Berger (1995) identified some of the most influential and important cultural critics and theorists. Some of those in his "selective list" include Michel Foucault, Jacques Lacan, Noam Chomsky, Carl Jung, and Antonio Gramsci.¹ The only women included in the said list were Mary Douglas and Herta Herzog. Although hooks was not included in the Berger list, she was praised for her cultural criticism and vision (Lee, 2019), dubbed as one of the most accessible critics of the times (hooks, 1997), and counted in *Time* magazine's 100 Women of the Year for unpacking a praxis that challenges the grasp of sex, race, and class (hampton, 2020).

However, despite such accolades, and contrary to her numerous books and essays, hooks' frameworks for cultural criticism seem to be disorganized. Some have regarded her discourses as "ahistorical," "unscholarly," and of

little relevance to the academe (Bell-Scott, 1985). Her writing style (the memoir) has been criticized as forgetful of feminist and other critical theories, and lacking in critical awareness (Franklin, 2009). One even stated that hooks is inarticulate with her theories, “uses inappropriate language,” and “has no scholarly methodology” (Christian, 2001, p. 470). Furthermore, due to her “discursive modes of analysis,” hooks veers away from “the more schematic linear method embodied in the multiple choice matrix and later on the formats expected for academic research” (p. 470).

This paper intends to show that bell hooks’ theories have a structured method for a critical discourse analysis (CDA). While some have sought to study hooks’ works through critical perspectives and historical tracings (see Biana, 2020b, 2021; Davidson & Yancy, 2009), and others have used hooks’ theories to generally examine cultural texts (Ahmadgoli & Raof, 2020; Biana & Nalam, 2020; Liu, 2019), this paper does a close reading of hooks’ writings to organize and make sense of her cultural criticism frameworks within the approach of CDA work. The goal of this undertaking is to form a more cohesive “hooksian” cultural criticism framework, which may be used by scholars and critics who intend to interrogate gender and other intersectional representations in various media.

As a framework suited for CDA, how can hooks’ theory be used as a tool to critique hidden connections between semiosis and the unequal distribution of power or web of oppressions, and thereby instigating socio-political change at the same time (McHoul & Rapley, 2001)? CDA is the systematic exploration of non-obvious causal and determinate connections between “(a) discursive practices, events and texts, and (b) wider social and cultural structures, relations and processes; to investigate how such practices, events and texts arise out of and are ideologically shaped by relations of power and struggles over power” (Fairclough 1995, p. 132). Furthermore, CDA is the detailing or examining of texts and interactions which may contribute to socio-political interventions thereby improving people’s lives. Such issues sought to be addressed by CDA are “gender and sexism, media representations, bureaucracy, language in relation to education, the restructuring of capitalism and neo-liberalism [sic]” (McHoul & Rapley, 2001, p. 25). More importantly, CDA is more than just a negative critique, but rather a positive analysis as well, which is a significant component in social struggle (McHoul & Rapley, 2001).

Since hooks has already done so much work as a cultural critic, the task now is to take her works apart and see how these parts fit together to understand the order, interventions, and intellectual motivations of her methods. Ways by which these frameworks may be used for interrogating sex, gender, and other intersectional representations are also suggested.

hooks' Cultural Criticism

Cultural critics have given mass, popular, and everyday materials their due attention in recent decades. Some of the media that have been the focus of critiques are “television, cinema, advertising, rock music, magazines, minority literature(s) and popular literature (thrillers, science fiction, romances, westerns, Gothic fiction)” (Leitch, 2001, pp. 26–27). The target of these strategies is representations or likenesses, which “come in various forms: films, television, photographs, paintings, advertisements and other forms of popular culture” (Baldonado, 2017, para. 2). Recently, social media and digital media culture have revised the understanding of such criticism, and have been the focus of critiques (see Carlson, 2016; Johansen, 2021; Kristensen et al., 2021; Teurlings, 2018).

In the beginning of the 1960s, feminist critics began scrutinizing popular media. Modern feminist critics, in particular, sought to establish strategies, frameworks, and models to understand, read, and analyze the role of media in propagating sex and gender inequalities by looking at specific representations and misrepresentations of women (Watkins & Emerson, 2000). Whether these cultural productions were accurate ways of seeing women or unrealistic meanings and messages presented by mass media, critics were concerned about how girls and women internalize and apply them in their actual lives (Genz & Brabon, 2009). This is known as the “images of women” debate, where “media socialize women/girls into consuming and accepting false images of femininity and traditional sex roles” (Genz & Brabon, 2009, p. 21).

These traditional roles reinforce stringent home or family life roles. For example, Betty Freidan (2010) criticized advertisements that seemed to portray women as those whose only desire in life is to purchase household items. Accordingly, there are conscious manipulations that portray women as constant homemakers and housewives. Naomi Wolf (2013), on the other hand, claims that the feminine mystique period has long been over, and that “the beauty myth” is now prevalent in society. Rather than domesticity, the beauty myth has taken control of women. Freidan and Wolf believed that traditional feminine roles and conceptions of beauty contribute to women’s oppression (Genz & Brabon, 2009). Women hate themselves, become obsessed with beauty, and are terrorized by these impossible notions of beauty. The myth became a way to control women.

Modern feminist critics, however, were called out by radical feminist critics (such as hooks) for merely focusing on describing their personal woes in relation to media portrayals (Biana, 2020b). They were reformists rather than revolutionary (or radical), for their consciousness was aimed at issues of white, privileged women only. The rise of black feminist perspectives

called for the inclusion of *others* in feminist media criticism discourse (hooks, 2006). As such, today's critics must look at frameworks that examine popular culture alongside "real feminism and fictional feminism" (Genz & Brabon, 2009, p. 25). Hooks, in particular, claims that the feminist fight should include more than just the plight of the few (who are oppressed by virtue of their sex or gender) but all those who are oppressed (be they black or white, rich or poor, etc.). While modern feminists contend that reality is not represented and women's images are more often than not distorted, hooks invites us to go beyond just looking at women's images alone. Reformist feminists claim that patriarchal structures alone use representation or women's images as a medium to reinforce its ideals (hooks, 2006). Hooks (2000) asserts that it is more than just patriarchy, but rather a White Capitalist Supremacist Patriarchy which terrorizes the media. Radical feminist critics are different from reformists in the sense that they look at how dominance, discrimination, power, and control are manifested in media through the intersecting web of oppressions in play.

Bell hooks (1997) calls herself a cultural critic, not a film critic nor a literary critic, and her critiques are founded on the assertion that pop culture should necessarily be examined, for it is where pedagogy and learning is. After all, media is the "preferred site of social and political struggle" (Watkins & Emerson, 2000, p. 152). Hooks looks at the production, distribution, and consumption of discourses with her radical feminist theory as the basis of the critique. She is also concerned with the critique of values, practices, and representations in pop culture. Furthermore, she investigates the systems of domination that tend to be reinforced in these discourses. Since hooks is concerned with making theory accessible to everyone (particularly even to those outside the academe), she gives importance to popular media and its availability to the masses. Hooks' (2006) goal really is to make the "meta-linguistic theory of difference and otherness" (p. 15) more easily grasped so that it would be more exciting and much more interesting for everybody.

To be a cultural critic is to have a point of view. Present and future critics may learn a thing or two from hooks' points of view. It goes deeper than merely the fusion of her feminist theory and general cultural criticism. After all, critics "belong to particular groups, adhere to particular philosophies, and have associations with particular disciplines, and their criticisms are connected to their groups, disciplines and belief systems" (Berger, 1995, p. 18). There is a system to this critiquing from a point of view, and this close reading of hooks' works seeks to uncover such by surveying her works, looking at their parts and how they fit together. How is hooks as an ideal cultural critic, what is her mindset? What is hooks' ideal process for the interrogation of representations? This study looks at

hooks' outlook and tools for critique, and charts them for a more organized understanding.

Hooks' works that have been closely read in this study were *Ain't I A Woman* (1981), *Teaching to Transgress* (1994), *Reel to Real: Race, Sex, and Class at the Movies* (1996b), *Cultural Criticism and Transformation* (1997), *Wounds of Passion: A Writing Life* (1998), *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (2000), *We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity* (2004), *Outlaw Culture: Resisting Representations* (2006), *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (2014a), And *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (2014b). Although hooks has many other works, these are the ones that explicitly convey her outlook and methods for cultural criticism and interrogating race, gender, class, and intersectional representations in pop culture.²

hooks' Outlook for Cultural Criticism

The Ideal Cultural Critic

Critical Thinking and Literacy

Critical thinking is a process learned through reading theory and actively analyzing texts (hooks, 1994). The foundation of hooks' cultural criticism is critical thinking and literacy. This pattern of thinking can be likened to John Dewey's (2004) political philosophy which posits that one can participate freely in a democracy only if they have the intellectual capacity to do so. One should be able to read and write first, then eventually be able to engage in critical thinking. Information can come only from "the printed page," and not being able to access such pages prevents access to forms of enlightenment as well. Writing and theoretical talk (oral or otherwise) is "most meaningful when it invites readers to engage in critical reflection" (hooks, 1994, p. 70).

Hooks proposes a radical openness in order to develop the process of critical thinking. Only then can the critical process of theory be empowering and enabling. When critical thinking exists, there can be a personal and cultural transformation. As hooks puts it, "without the capacity to think critically about ourselves and our lives, none of us would be able to move forward, to change, to grow" (hooks, 1994, p. 202).

Unfortunately, many people, especially certain marginalized groups, are discouraged from exercising their intellect to the point of being censored and silenced (hooks, 1994, p. 68). It is the critical thinker's role to call out these points of control of more dominant groups. These experiences of censorship may also inspire further foundations of cultural criticism. In one of her writings, hooks talks of her experience in graduate class where the

course reading list “had writings by white women and men, one black man, but no material by or about black, Native American Indian, Hispanic or Asian women” (hooks, 2000a, p. 12). The absence of *other* or non-dominant groups in cultural texts and discourses can also be a center of critical analysis. Such censorships can be triggers for radical consciousness.

Without critical thinking and literacy, one cannot embrace theories of cultural criticism, much more understand frameworks for dissecting various representations. Whether a person is “incredibly privileged materially” or “extraordinarily disadvantaged,” critical thinking is a “profoundly meaningful” tool for transformation (hooks, 1998, p. 3).

The Enlightened Witness

The enlightened witness has “a greater level of literacy” (hooks, 1997, p. 8). To critique culture as an enlightened witness is to be aware of the implications of representations. The issue here is not freeing ourselves from representations but rather being critically vigilant about what is being told to us and how we respond to what is being told (hooks, 1997, p. 8). Dominant modes of representation cannot be dislodged and the possibility of freeing oneself from representation is impossible. However, becoming aware of the influence of representation is possible. The enlightened witness is not free from representation but rather aware that representations are erroneous and that they can bind and oppress people. “Changing how we see images is clearly one way to change the world” (hooks, 1996b, p. 6).

Discourses on representations, though, must not be limited to whether an image is good or bad. This is one element of a CDA. “The idea of a good image is often informed simply by whether or not it differs” (hooks, 2014b, p. 72) from a racist, sexist, or classist stereotype. Relying on this process, critics fail to analyze issues based on context, form, audience, and experience, even when these other factors likewise contribute to the construction of images. Sexist and racist relations are still being perpetuated by images of whiteness or white maleness—despite its supposed re-writing or revision. “Images are manipulated to appear different” (hooks, 2014b, p. 171) or going against racist or sexist stereotypes; they still reinforce, however, systems of oppression.

As an enlightened witness, one should understand that popular culture is “the primary pedagogical medium for masses of people globally who want to, in some way, understand the politics of difference” (hooks, 1997, p. 2). Instead of promoting feminism, though, pop culture tends to do the complete opposite. “The corporate-dominated mass media are the key to why our fast-moving culture is so slow to change, stereotypes are so persistent, and the power structure is so entrenched” (Dicker et al., 2003,

p. 37). One must therefore witness how representations influence lives. Images mean something, and there is a direct link and impact between representations and life-choices.

The Disruptor Mindset

Crossing Borders

“In general, there are three kinds of critics: outsiders, insiders, and those who cross boundaries” (Ackerly & Hardin, 2000, p. 23). Hooks can be categorized as the third type of critic, one who crosses borders. In *Outlaw Culture: Resisting Representations* (2006), hooks’ cultural criticism was directed towards “border crossing” or the acknowledgement of cultural hybridity or the diversity of individuals in society. It is a way of looking at culture that takes into consideration the many points of view of people belonging to different races, classes, sexes, genders, and other such categories (hooks, 2006).

Hooks (2006) differentiates this framework from “textbook” cultural criticism where cultural critics merely affirm radical or transgressive cultural practices passively. Hooks claims to “cross boundaries to take another look, interrogate, and in some cases to recover and redeem” (p. 6). Border crossing is not simply “a masturbatory mental exercise that condones the movement of the insurgent intellectual mind across new frontiers” (p. 6). There should be a recommendation for a future course of action after the critical analysis of the cultural phenomenon, upon which strategies for decolonization and degenderization may be built upon. Border crossing should not “become the justification for movements from the center into the margin that merely mimic in a new way old patterns of cultural imperialism and colonialism” (hooks, 2006, p. 6). To cross borders, the cultural critic must disrupt the colonized/colonizer, privileged/underprivileged, and dominant/marginalized mindsets by “seeing everything with new eyes” (hooks, 2006, p. 6). Crossing the borders includes a recreation of a culture that debunks present structures of domination. A cultural critique begins with the “mindset and progressive politics that is fundamentally anti-colonialist, that negates cultural imperialism in all its manifestations” (hooks, 2006, p. 7).

Robin Cohen (1998, p. 5) discusses that contemporary transnational social movements (TSMs) also advocate looking at “alternative frameworks of meaning” while demanding for “racial equality” and going against “the exclusion of other social groups.” He claimed that TSMs work towards the construction of cultural and personal identities of women, persons with disabilities, refugees, the LGBT community, or older citizens. In contrast, but in support of hooks nonetheless, TSMs provide a more encompassing appreciation of global interconnectedness. Furthermore, Cohen (1998, p.

6) asserts that social movements realize that issues within specific social groups are “inextricable tied to much wider global structures and problems,” and are inherently transboundary in character. As such, it is necessary to cross borders in order to address certain social issues. Chandra Talpade Mohanty (2013) calls this practice as transnational feminist crossings, or the confrontation of “the limits and possibilities of feminist critique across borders.” (p. 968). She claimed that while crossing borders seems difficult, there must be continuous learning about the “colonial technologies of occupation,” and “the intricate gendered and racialized exercises of power” (p. 968). Critics must acknowledge the blind spots.

Hooks (2006) proposes a type of border-crossing that makes materials readily available and understandable to the non-materially privileged. In order to spark a critical consciousness among the oppressed, there must be an attempt to tap all walks of life, educate the privileged, share feminist thought, intervene in internalized isms, and take action (hooks, 2006, p. 6).

Multiple Voices

Similar to the border crossing mindset, hooks (1994) asserts the need to be willing to write criticism in multiple voices. To “write” in multiple voices is not to privilege one voice over another, or one race, sex, or culture over another (Alexander, 1992). Critics should not assume that readers are primarily from a privileged audience. After all, “coming to voice remains relevant to women in exploited and oppressed groups” (Marcano, 2009, p. 113). Privileged scholars assume “positions of familiarity” as if “their work were not coming into being in a cultural context” of supremacy and domination, “as though it were no way shaped and informed by that context” (Alexander, 1992, p. 178).

Hooks’ direction may be refuted, however, by postcolonial feminist Audre Lorde (2012) who says that highlighting the differences between human beings should not be the cornerstone of coming to voice. Women should not “hide behind the mockeries of separations that have been imposed upon us and which so often we accept as our own” (Lorde, 2012, p. 43). Hooks may qualify her argument by stressing that privileged critics should be aware of oppressive factors. There may be trouble, though, with being too conscious of (women’s) multiple voices, as it may rob women of the possibility of being heard:

“I can’t possibly teach Black women’s writing—their experience is so different from mine.” Yet how many years have you spent teaching Plato and Shakespeare and Proust? Or another, “she’s a white woman and what could she possibly have to say to me?” Or, “she’s a lesbian, what would

my husband say, or my chairman?” Or again, “this woman writes of her sons and I have no children.” And all the other endless ways in which we rob ourselves of ourselves and each other. (Lorde, 2012, pp. 43–44)

In one of her practices of writing cultural criticism, hooks (2006) claims that she becomes “polyphonic” or many-voiced. She combines many voices in her critique—that of “academic talk, standard English, vernacular patios, the language of the street” (p. 8). This goes hand in hand with “publishing in multiple locations” (p. 8) in order to reach multiple audiences, which may eventually pave the way for a cultural revolution.

One of the multiple voices is the radical voice, which acknowledges that it speaks from the margins. The “margin” that hooks refers to is the position or the place of the Other. The margin is a place of resistance against domination. However, to resist, one must speak or write openly about suffering, pain, and deprivation. This space of resistance can either be real or imagined, it can be an artistic or literary practice. The margin must be contrasted against the center, which is the space of the colonizers (hooks, 2014b, pp. 151–153).

While hooks talks about the colonizers, the same criticism has been made by Mohanty (1988) with regard to the way Western feminist scholars continuously “colonize” representations of the colonized, particularly the Third World Woman. Mohanty (1988) asserts that Western feminist discourse tends to homogenize and systematize the oppression of Third World women and other complexities. She also associates the practice of Western feminism to “contemporary imperialism” and urges the supposed “colonizers” to “examine the political implications” of their “analytic strategies and principles” (p. 336). This same examination may be used as a means to recognize the existence of the uniqueness of multiple voices (or in Mohanty’s case, the voices of Third World women).

In her work, Mohanty (1988) gives an example of how a colonizer tends to paint the colonized from their own hegemonic point of view. For example, the Third World woman is seen as “ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition-bound, domestic, family-oriented, victimized,” while the Western woman is “educated, modern, as having control over their own bodies and sexualities, and the freedom to make their own decisions” (Mohanty, 1988, p. 337). As such, even multiple voices, especially those which are embedded in the Western feminist mindset, need to be challenged as well. Given this, when a supposed “colonizer” like Western scholars hooks or Mohanty assumes multiple voices, they have to similarly avoid the pitfalls of universalizing images *under Western eyes*.

Remembrance and Resistance

Michel Foucault (2012) stresses the importance of discourse as “both an instrument and an effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling-block, a point of resistance, and a starting point for an opposing strategy” (p. 101). Like multiple voices, hooks (2014b) acknowledges that when one speaks and writes, one must recall one’s origins, the place where one comes from. This ensures that the oppressed’s suffering is reflected in theory building. So despite the explicit sexism contained in men’s writings, for example, there must be a recognition of “the appropriateness of complex critical responses to writing” (hooks, 2014b, p. 66) by others.

In the struggle for resistance, remembrance and reclamation are vital. Hooks (2014b) applauds cultural practices and cultural texts (specifically films, black literature, and critical theory) that tries to remember—“spaces where one is able to redeem and reclaim the past, legacies of pain, suffering, and triumph in ways that transform present reality” (p. 147). Remembering is not merely limited to the recapping of past events or wishing for the recurrence of previous events, but a revamping of the old into something that would change the here and now:

Fragments of memory are not simply represented as flat documentaries but constructed to give a new take on the old, constructed to move us into a different mode of articulation... Our struggle is also a struggle of memory against forgetting; a politicization of memory that distinguishes nostalgia, that longing for something to be as once it was, a kind of useless act, from that remembering that serves to illuminate and transform the present. (hooks, 2014b, p. 147)

In *We Real Cool* (2004), hooks talks about how studying the history of (oppressed) black people can provide a means for the oppressed to heal themselves. In the context of music and musicians, she claims that, “if every young black male in America simply studied the history, the life, and work of black musicians, they would have blueprints for healing and survival... to paradise, to healing, to a life lived in community” (p. 139). This remembrance can be likened to a historical analysis which should be integrated in the review of texts, like new historicism. Influenced by Foucault’s critical theory, Stephen Greenblatt (2007) describes new historicism as literary criticism that acknowledges the rich, indispensable history of certain cultural phenomena and claims to admit the inadequacies of terms used in such criticism. These inadequacies extend not “only of contemporary culture but of the culture of the past” (Veese, 2013, p. 111) as well. Elizabeth Fox-Genovese (as cited in Veese, 2013) talks of how attention shifts from

text to context in new historicism thereby emphasizing on hegemony and struggle in discourses. Such type of analysis should be celebrated for efforts to restore marginal groups in the discussion.

Hooks (2014b) discusses how remembering is a self-critical process. Critics should remember their home. Furthermore, she claims that like one's own vernacular language, a person's home is where perspectives are formed, and the confrontation and acceptance of dispersal and fragmentation is necessary for the the construction of a new world. Likewise, remembering one's home "reveals more fully where we are, who we can become, an order that does not demand forgetting" (p. 148). The radical voice enables resistance as a counter-language. Resistance is to fight against the causes of oppression such as racism and sexism and to end white supremacist male domination. In the past, such as the time of black slavery in the United States, resistance meant freedom from slavery and injustice. The radical voice, "while it may resemble the colonizer's tongue,...has undergone a transformation, it has irrevocably changed." To remember is also to empower further the radical voice (p. 150). Resistance is sustained by a "remembrance of the past, which includes recollections of broken tongues giving us ways to speak that decolonize our minds, our very beings" (p. 150).

hooks and Interrogating Representations

Race, Sex, and Class

Hooks investigates how sex, race, and class are portrayed in representations. With regards to sex and gender representations, she notices that white males still gaze at women as sex objects. When it comes to portrayals in films, she notices that brown and black people remain as backdrops or supporting casts. Of course, these are just examples of particular characters present in cultural productions. Hooks proposes media and artistic creations that are truly oppositional, where the hegemonies "naturalizing" dominant sexes ethnicities, and classes are challenged. After all, the interrogation of representations requires the "critical evaluation of the construction of the other" (hooks, 2014b, p. 171).

In highlighted images, what type of stereotypes are enforced? Who are "evil" characters in certain cultural productions, and how are they contrasted against other innocent and good characters? In magazines or films, for example, what are the ethnicities or looks of the preferred women, and how are their sexualities or repressions being expressed? Hooks (2006) claims that Black women are apparently exemplified in a racist and sexist manner, being represented as women who love (the act of) sex.

Most portrayals of the poor are shocking as well. They “almost always portrayed the poor as shiftless, mindless, lazy, dishonest and unworthy” (hooks, 2006, p. 195). “[The] poor are portrayed through negative stereotypes...[w]illing to commit all manner of dehumanizing and brutal acts in the name of material gain, the poor are portrayed as seeing themselves as always and only worthless. Worth is gained only by means of material success” (p. 196).

Given these observations, representations in mass media and cultural productions seem to only reflect the points of view of the privileged. In this regard, hooks (2006) proposes an “alternative” politics of representation—where images of the black, female, and poor are not “enslaved to any exploitative or oppressive agenda” (pp. 178–179). She claims that those critically aware should regularly self-reflect and self-interrogate “so that one does not unwittingly become complicit in maintaining existing exploitative and oppressive structures” (p. 179). Furthermore, cultural critics should not fear discussing their privileges and the privileges of others. They must admit and acknowledge whether they have power or privilege due to their membership in certain groups.

The Oppositional Gaze

The oppressed are denied the right to gaze. Hooks relates this to Michel Foucault’s theory of power where power is reproduced differently but uses similar modes of strategy. In “gazing,” the oppressed are not given the power to “look” at the oppressor. This, in turn, results in a “daring to look, a rebellious desire, an oppositional gaze” (hooks, 2014a, p. 116). Foucault (2012) also discusses how in power relations, resistance becomes a necessity. Assuming an oppositional gaze is the powerless people’s mark of resistance. If they were to speak for those who are silenced, cultural critics must find the “margins, gaps, and locations on and through the body where agency can be found” (hooks, 2014a, p. 116). One site of resistance is the “gaze” where

[s]ubordinates in relations of power learn experientially that there is a critical gaze, on that ‘looks’ to document, one that is oppositional. In resistance, struggle, the power of the dominated to assert agency by claiming and cultivating ‘awareness’ politicizes ‘looking’ relations—one learns to look a certain way in order to resist. (hooks, 2014a, p. 116)

The oppositional gaze can be used to look at the media. Do certain forms of media propagate knowledge and power systems by enforcing white

supremacy or male domination? A critical spectatorship and interrogation is necessary when one gazes at the television or the movies, or even social media. “Critical discussion of the film while it was in progress or at its conclusion maintained the distance between spectator and the image” (hooks, 2014a, p. 117). Does the dominant culture maintain racism, classism, or sexism by perpetuating negative images of, say, colored people or women? Furthermore, an oppositional gaze is recognition of the absence of the oppressed group or the “insertion of violating representation” (hooks, 2014a, p. 122). It is an interrogation of the work, a cultivation of looking beyond race or gender—also an analysis of its content, form and language. An oppositional gaze creates a “critical space where the binary opposition of... woman as image, man as bearer of the look was continually deconstructed” (hooks, 2014a, p. 123).

Similarly, art critic John Berger in *Ways of Seeing* (1972) argues that men are ultimately the gazers and women are the objects being looked at. “Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at.... The surveyor of the woman in herself is male: the surveyed female. Thus, she turns herself into an object— and most particularly an object of vision: a sight.” (p. 47). hooks (2014a) contends that this classification can be overcome with an oppositional gaze, which is a resistance to the “imposition of dominant ways of knowing and looking” (p. 128).

When entering into the discourse, one must interrogate from the point of view of the subject and not as an object. The “new” way of looking or the oppositional gaze recognizes the absence and the violation of oppressed groups in media images (hooks, 2006). A new critical spectatorship demands that one critiques through a combination of contestation, resistance, interrogation and reinvention (hooks, 2014b). Critical spectators should be able to deconstruct narratives and interrogate text freely (hooks, 2014b). There should also be a creation of “alternative texts that are not solely reactions” (hooks, 2014a, p. 128). On multiple levels, it is a combination of contesting, resisting, revising, interrogating and reinventing. Hooks enjoins the community to engage in a collective critique and to question these politics of representation.

Intervention and Interrogation

Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci introduced the concept of cultural hegemony, referring to “a situation wherein a social group or class is ideologically dominant” (Femia, 1975, p. 29). Given this ideological dominance, the existing culture is accepted by the marginalized groups as “good” for them as well, thus negating any intention of overthrowing the current system (status quo) despite its being oppressive to them. Oppressed

groups should develop a culture of their own, apart from the oppressors. Any class that hopes to rise above oppression must exert an effort to develop both intellectual and moral consciousness (Femia, 1975). This is difficult, though, as the oppressed tend to fear freedom as freedom would require the oppressed to eject the guidelines of the oppressor and replace it with one's own autonomy and responsibility (hooks, 2006).

Like feminist writer Rita Mae Brown, hooks (2000b) goes beyond Marx's definition of class as the relationship to production. It is one's behavior, assumptions, behavior, expectations, and concepts of the future. It is how one addresses issues, and how one thinks, feels, and acts. Hooks found that interrogation of patriarchal representations may only be done if the matter of class has been confronted. Looking at productions, she calls for an "in-your-face critique of capitalist greed" (p. 1) which acknowledges how class conflict is entangled in racialized and gendered systems as well. Interrogations of employed (or even unemployed) class experiences must be done as well, with a solidarity that uses oppositional gazing, border crossing, or concerted exchange (Biana, 2020a).

Hooks (2014b) commented on the supposed "new" terminologies of that era. Buzzwords such as difference, the Other, hegemony and ethnography were already commonly deployed in academic circles. These discussions paved the way for the inclusion of the Other in theory. She calls this a "critical interrogation." However, despite the discourse, no one seems to engage in a critique or an interrogation of the dominant race or gender. For example, if women's otherness is being discussed, how come maleness is not being interrogated as well? It is imperative for us to critique not only images of the marginalized, but the dominant, too. Examining all fronts of the systems of oppression ensures a "persistent, rigorous, and informed critique...that could determine what forces of denial, fear, and competition are responsible for creating fundamental gaps" (hooks, 2014b, p. 54) between the theories of the oppressed and the oppressor.

hooks' Frameworks for Criticism

Cultural criticism is the "practice of critique and analysis that would disrupt and even deconstruct those cultural productions that were designed to promote and reinforce domination" (hooks, 2014b, p. 3). Cultural critiques are delivered through "writings, teachings and habits of being" and this in turn are strategies that "enable colonized folks to decolonize" and degenderize "their minds and actions, thereby promoting the insurrection of subjugated knowledge" (hooks, 2014b, p. 8). Hooks is committed to radical cultural politics which should bear recommendations for future courses of action. As such, theoretical paradigms should be offered to contextualize political

strategies. The critiques should eventually influence changes in systemic thinking, and institutions (such as the family, education, and others).

Histories are also vital as 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” (hooks, 2014b, p. 147). In a way, hooks’ cultural critique positions her alongside other feminist standpoint theorists who find methods to empower oppressed groups, shed light on their experiences, and develop an oppositional consciousness (Harding, 2004). Some of these well known theorists include Nancy Harstock, Patricia Hill Collins, Evelyn Fox Keller, Dorothy Smith, and Donna Haraway. These theorists recognize the dynamism of experience which may topple dominant perspectives (Lenz, 2004). In particular, hooks’ (1989) radical standpoint prescribes participation “in the formation of counter-hegemonic cultural practice to identify the spaces where we begin the process of re-vision” (p. 15).

Given these outlooks and tools, hooks’ frameworks for cultural criticism may be charted. To be able to interrogate representations according to “hooksian” standards, we must first start off with a shift in paradigm. The ideal cultural critic is literate and capable of critical thinking, with the goal of becoming an enlightened witness. They should have the disruptor mindset. The disruptor mindset presupposes that the critic can cross the borders, engage in multiple voices (particularly the radical voice), and “remember.” This remembrance, as mentioned earlier, is necessary to contextualize the objects of critique. The paragon may then use hooks’ methods of intervention and interrogation such as the oppositional gaze.

The process of critique may be organized thus: 1) the critic first looks at the portrayal through a new lens—that of the oppressed, 2) the critic determines if members of certain oppressed groups are absent or violated in representations, 3) the critic examines how certain oppressed groups are represented in the context of categories like sex, race, and class, 4) the critic looks at the authenticity or truthfulness of the portrayals, and 5) the critic voices out the impact of these representations. It should be pointed out that the critique should not be reactionary, but rather radical and progressive. In a sense, the critic should answer the following questions with regards to the images presented in media, and later on “expose” or voice out the impacts of these images:

Table 1. Interrogating Sex, Race, and Class Representations.

Sex	Race	Class
In what time period and social context is the representation conferred?		
How are individuals of a certain sex/class/ race portrayed in pop culture? Are they given equal status? Are they ignored? Are they patronized? Are they demeaned? Are they idealized?		
How important are the female characters? How individual are they in their own right? Are they credited with their own existence and character? In their relationships with others, how are they treated? How much interest do the male characters exhibit about women's concerns?	How important are the black characters? How individual are they in their own right? Are they credited with their own existence and character? In their relationships with white characters, how are they treated? How much interest do the white characters exhibit about the black characters' concerns?	How important are the poor characters? How individual are they in their own right? Are they credited with their own existence and character? In their relationships with affluent characters, how are they treated? How much interest do the rich characters exhibit about the poor characters' concerns?
How are diverse factors portrayed in relation to each other?		

What happens in this interrogation is that more than relying on finding stereotypes or negative images, relationships of the characters to themselves as well as to their community and to their supposed oppressors are investigated. Looking at enhancing hooks' framework in a truly intersectional fashion, varying times and contexts in which these representations were created should also be examined. This way, one distorted oppressive representation does not trump the other forms of oppressive representations (Runyan, 2018). Furthermore, the interrogation of race and class and how it impacts on our constitutions of sex and gender should also be examined; and conversely, how these patriarchal and dominant stereotypes affect the diverse aspects of these images. This way, the complexity of the structures of society, and the factors that constitute it are affirmed.

Whether portrayals are "truthful" or authentic (when compared to what happens in reality) is a part of the critique as well. It is also vital that the critic voices out the impact of these representations. Granted that these portrayals are what they are, how do they influence certain ideals and ways of thinking? Do they enforce the systems of domination? Are they helpful in

constructing pathways towards liberation from oppressive White Capitalist Supremacist Patriarchal systems? As an enlightened witness, the critic emerges with a more critical consciousness from the exercise and shares their learning through a radical voice. The critique that one comes up with is a contribution to radical work, which can give birth to a transformed culture that is resistant to representations. By recognizing the impact of pop culture images, cultural productions can be deconstructed to promote a radical mindset that does not reinforce or promote domination.

What is lacking in hooks' method, though, is her recognition of other groups. Hooks mainly focuses on certain binary oppositions (male/female, white/black, rich/poor) that she neglects to include members of other marginalized groups (such as the LGBT community, younger or older people, members of the middle class, persons with disabilities, women from developing nations, etc.). Hooks mentions these other groups, but she does not clearly state the inclusion of these groups in her method of critique. Although hooks continuously discusses that critique of representations points to a cultural transformation, she does not elevate the significance of relationships of these images on a global scale. Transnational feminist media scholars would look at systems of media and representation forms, "from which to unravel the complexity of global configurations" (Hegde, 2012, p. 1). Feminist cultural critics should likewise "revise and rethink theoretical frames... and produce critical, alternative accounts of globalization" (p. 1). This study acknowledges that while these concepts are not explicitly part of hooks' scope, their absence does not undermine her scholarly contributions. These observations, however, could be part of a call for the enrichment and extension of hooks' theorizing (Biana, 2020b). Hooks implicitly mentions critical involvement with "a world beyond yourself" (hooks, 1994, p. 158), and this is where other critics may theorize their own instances of border crossing, remembrance, and their own multiple voices.

Hooks' (2006) meta-linguistic theory unpacks the semiosis in the dialectical relationships between social relations, social identities, cultural values, and consciousness. Given the social and cultural complexity of portrayals and representations, hooks' frameworks provide a way to investigate practices, events and texts that may arise out of ideologically shaped relations of power and struggles over power. In the true spirit of CDA, the question that must be asked amidst all this is how can hooks' framework then be a commitment to social change? Hooks believes that praxis must have a pedagogical approach. As such, these interrogations and interventions must be translated and demonstrated into pedagogical practices, which are "engaged in creating a new language, rupturing disciplinary boundaries, decentering authority, and rewriting the institutional and discursive

borderlands in which politics becomes a condition for reasserting the relationship between agency, power, and struggle” (hooks, 2006, p. 3). It is in the global classroom where cultural criticism begins to become a social practice, and a tool for reviewing values and norms wherein oppressions are founded upon (Biana, 2013; McHoul & Rapley, 2001).

Conclusion

Hooks’s cultural criticism theory’s starting point is the acknowledgement that popular culture representations highly influence the way one thinks. It is also the venue where learning happens, and there is a direct link between representations in pop culture and the way one lives. Hooks contends that this link can be critically evaluated. One question to ask is what would the impact of these images or representations on society be? Hooks admits that she has no intention of eradicating representations completely. Rather, it is about the awareness and the consciousness of the impact of representations. It is about being critically vigilant, being radically feminist and progressive about certain cultural texts. A person who is critically vigilant is an enlightened witness, and the enlightened witness interrogates how images can empower or oppress people.

A question that could be posed is whether such practice of critique effects actual social change. Cultural transformation happens with using critical lenses and striving to be enlightened witnesses. The interrogation of representations is just one point in the multiple points of struggle and resistance (which is part of mass consciousness-raising). This struggle will only succeed with political education that has enough revolutionary ideology that mirrors the margin’s experiences. Furthermore, the role of critiques as springboards for rethinking oppressive systemic policies and institutions should be reemphasized. To stay true to hooks’ famous line that “feminism is for everybody,” her meta-linguistic theory of difference and otherness should be made more accessible to everyone. Hooks believes that a pedagogical setting is apt for these springboards.

When I began this paper, I never doubted hooks’ capacity and recommendations for cultural criticism. I merely wanted to organize her thoughts so that her outlook and tools for interrogating representations may be understood as a step-by-step process for a possible CDA. The same process may be used by aspiring critics, media scholars, feminist theorists, and ordinary people even, in examining everyday portrayals in pop culture. The table provided in the previous section, which summarizes hooks’ line of inquiry, gives a clearer picture of how one may radically assess motivated representations. The hooks that emerges in this paper is one who provokes a shift away from traditional feminist thinking (which limits inquiry to

sexist representations alone). Hooks promotes the understanding of interlocking social relations and the dynamics between diverse individuals. Rather than just overthrowing the patriarchy, hooks calls for a new social order in this type of cultural criticism, one which seeks to examine White Capitalist Supremacist Patriarchy against the backdrop of pop culture representations. Hooks' radical vision is inclusivity, self-actualization, and a critical political consciousness. The challenge posed is how her cultural criticism frameworks may be further applied outside pedagogical settings to effect more revolutionary changes.

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Notes

¹ The complete selective list includes Barthes, Levi-Strauss, Foucault, Althusser, Lacan, Durkheim, Derrida, Bourdieu, Bazin, Greimas, Bakhtin, Vygotsky, Propp, Eisenstein, Letman, Shklovsky, Peirce, Chomsky, Schramm, Jakobson, Turner, Geertz, Jameson, McLuhan, Innis, Frye, Williams, Hall, Wittgenstein, Hoggart, Douglas, Empson, Saussure, Jung, Freud, Herzog, Gramsci, and Eco (Berger, 1995).

² Other works that may also be included for future study are *Killing rage: Ending racism* (1996a), *Where we stand: Class matters* (2000b), and *Belonging: A culture of place* (2009). These works similarly talk about internalized racism or classism, and representations and imaginations.

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About the Author

HAZEL T. BIANA is Associate Professor of Philosophy at De La Salle University-Manila (DLSU). She specializes in gender studies and postfeminist philosophy, and works on issues related to intersectionality and cultural criticism. (hazel.biana@dlsu.edu.ph)

