

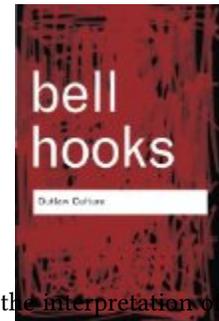
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Bell Hooks. *Outlaw Culture: Resisting Representations.* New York: Routledge, 2006. viii + 309 pp. \$19.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-415-38958-7.

Reviewed by Steven Mintz (University of Houston)
Published on H-Women (December, 1995)



In her most recent volume of cultural criticism, Bell Hooks analyzes “outlaw” culture—forms of cultural expression associated with contemporary society’s margins—and the politics of cultural interpretation. Her essential theme is that while many academics assume that the culture of the margins is subversive, that it represents an authentic expression of the values and beliefs of marginalized groups, in fact these works often serve conservative ends, reinforcing stereotypes and ultimately reaffirming conventional norms. A class analysis lies behind this conclusion: that elites play a major role in shaping popular culture’s images and consumption. Hooks suggests that many liberal academics are so desperate to bridge the chasm that separates them from more “authentic” realms of society, that they project their fantasies on the icons and products of commercial culture (for example, initially idealizing Madonna as “patron saint of a new feminism” and later as “high priestess of a cultural hedonism”).

Although the book’s twenty essays range across a wide range of topics—including criticisms of the “new” feminism of Katie Roiphe and Camille Paglia and a reinterpretation of Columbus—the heart of the book focuses on race and its representation in film, art, and music. Three major themes run through these discussions. One is critical misinterpretation of black works by critics who unconsciously adopt a Eurocentric frame of reference.

Thus, for example, Hooks critiques the interpretation of gangster rap simply as a music of murder, materialism, and misogyny. On the one hand, she argues, this reflects a pervasive cultural demonization of the young black male; on the other hand, it reflects a perception of a huge young white male audience for a music emphasizing violence and sexism.

A second major theme is the persistence of racial stereotyping among avant garde works. For example, in her analysis of the film *The Crying Game*, Hooks emphasizes the persistence of older seemingly discredited racial images, such as the “tragedy” of interracial sex or the black woman as sexual initiator.

A third key theme is “white colonization”—that is, the incorporation of the constructs of white popular culture in supposedly authentic expressions of the culture of the street. Hence, in *Menace II Society*, Hooks shows how the conventions of the gangster genre have been transplanted with few modifications to contemporary hood. Or, she argues, the de-politization of Malcolm X in Spike Lee’s film in order to appeal to a cross-over audience.

A critic of all forms of separatism, Hooks seeks to encourage inclusion and “border crossing”—combining various voices and cultural levels. Her book does a masterful job of showing how race, class, and gender intersect in American popular culture.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-women>

Citation: Steven Mintz. Review of Hooks, Bell, *Outlaw Culture: Resisting Representations*. H-Women, H-Net Reviews. December, 1995.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=245>

Copyright © 1995 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.