bell hooks

A CRITICAL INTRODUCTION TO MEDIA AND COMMUNICATION THEORY

CATHERINE R. SQUIRES

bell hooks' writings have been touchstones for major debates in the "culture wars," fostering insight into many central questions in communication studies. Her work is vital to students and scholars who explore the ways in which media shape our sense of our selves, our roles, and those with whom we interact. This book provides readers with a measured, contextualized introduction to how hooks' writings on media and culture enhance our understanding of key concepts in communication. hooks' insistence on focusing our attention on the workings of power and the impact of history and her willingness to explore connections between individual and group experiences have produced provocative, fruitful conjectures about media and culture.

CATHERINE R. SQUIRES (Ph.D., Northwestern University) is the inaugural John and Elizabeth Bates Cowles Professor of Journalism, Diversity, and Equality at the University of Minnesota. She is the author of *Dispatches from the Color Line* (2007) and *African Americans and the Media* (2009) and co-editor of *The Obama Effect: Multidisciplinary Renderings of the 2008 Campaign* (2010). She has published articles on media and identity in many journals, including *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, *Communication Theory*, and the *Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics*.

A CRITICAL INTRODUCTION TO MEDIA AND COMMUNICATION THEORY

bell hooks

A CRITICAL INTRODUCTION TO MEDIA AND COMMUNICATION THEORY

David W. Park
Series Editor

Vol. 8

The Critical Introduction to Media and Communication Theory series
is part of the Peter Lang Media and Communication list.
Every volume is peer reviewed and meets
the highest quality standards for content and production.

PETER LANG
New York • Washington, D.C./Baltimore • Bern
Frankfurt • Berlin • Brussels • Vienna • Oxford

CATHERINE R. SQUIRES

bell hooks

A CRITICAL INTRODUCTION TO MEDIA AND COMMUNICATION THEORY

PETER LANG
New York • Washington, D.C./Baltimore • Bern
Frankfurt • Berlin • Brussels • Vienna • Oxford

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Squires, Catherine R.
Bell Hooks: a critical introduction to media
and communication theory / Catherine R. Squires.
p. cm. — (A critical introduction to media and communication theory; vol. 8)
Includes bibliographical references and index.
1. Mass media and race relations—United States.
2. Racism in mass media—United States. 3. Hooks, Bell. I. Title.
P94.5.M552U668 302.23092—dc23 2012042565
ISBN 978-1-4331-1587-5 (hardcover)
ISBN 978-1-4331-1586-8 (paperback)
ISBN 978-1-4539-1026-9 (e-book)
ISSN 1947-6264

Bibliographic information published by **Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek**.
Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the "Deutsche Nationalbibliografie"; detailed bibliographic data is available on the Internet at http://dnb.d-nb.de/.

The paper in this book meets the guidelines for permanence and durability of the Committee on Production Guidelines for Book Longevity of the Council of Library Resources.

© 2013 Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., New York
29 Broadway, 18th floor, New York, NY 10006
www.peterlang.com

All rights reserved.
Reprint or reproduction, even partially, in all forms such as microfilm, xerography, microfiche, microcard, and offset strictly prohibited.

Printed in the United States of America

Contents

Preface vii

Acknowledgments ix

Chapter One: An Introduction to bell hooks 1

Chapter Two: Deconstructing Dominator Culture 11

Chapter Three: Democracy, Civility, and bell hooks 37

Chapter Four: Media, Power, and Intersections 51

Chapter Five: Reception, Resistance, and Recovery 77

Chapter Six: Education As a Tool for Democracy 99

Epilogue: Notes on Revisiting Critical Theorist bell hooks 119

Bibliography 123

Index 127

Preface

I first encountered bell hooks when I was an undergraduate living in Los Angeles, California, far from my midwestern home. In a feminist studies class, we read *Ain't I a Woman*, just weeks before the city convulsed into violent protests. A jury acquitted the white police officers who savagely beat Rodney King, captured on videotape, and the world turned upside down. bell hooks was one source of clarity I turned to as I tried to make sense of it all. I was frustrated and angered by the continual roll of the same images of looters on television, while few reports about the gang truce and other positive actions of community members made the front pages. If I knew anything, I knew I wanted to study more thinkers like hooks to help me understand these events.

It is uncanny that, at the 20th anniversary of those riots—uprisings, if you will—and in the wake of Mr. King's death, I have finished this book about bell hooks and Communication Studies. hooks, as much as any of my professors, inspired me to pursue a degree in this field, to investigate why and how our media systems continue to churn out so many hurtful images and distorted narratives with racist, sexist, classist undertones.

I am sure many scholars of my generation—and subsequent cohorts—could share similar stories of inspiration. Indeed, I was pleasantly surprised when I was invited to talk about this book and was greeted by a standing-room-only crowd of graduate students in gender studies. This crowd was notably more diverse than most I'd been part of in graduate school, and they asked sophisticated, often poi-

gnant questions about theories and current events. Their queries went far beyond the heated debates of the culture wars I'd been unwittingly tangled in when folks often dismissed hooks' work—or were still unaware of it—in many of my Communication Studies classes and some of the Feminist Studies courses.

It has been thrilling, and a privilege, to revisit bell hooks' work and think of her influence on myself and my field. Without hooks and her cohort of critical thinkers, our field would be poorly equipped to make sense of, and theorize, contemporary communication phenomena, let alone be reflexive about the motives and directions of our research and teaching practices. This book has provided me with an opportunity to examine my own habits, to revisit questions within the field, and to reflect on my own academic life. One moment of reflection was prompted unexpectedly as I literally lifted the cover of the book *Yearning* to rediscover an inscription written by my mother. She gave me the book as a gift as I began my graduate studies. The inscription wishes for me an intellectual life that will satisfy my yearnings, and I must admit I was teary-eyed as I read that wish, reflecting on how much of it has been granted, and how much more I've to discover.

— Catherine R. Squires
July 2012

Acknowledgments

I would be remiss if I didn't begin by expressing my heartfelt gratitude to Dave Park for inviting me to be part of this series. I thank him for his careful editing skills and his always-enthusiastic (often hilarious) right-on-time email communications over the process of drafting this book. While all errors remaining are certainly due to my faults, Dave has been a wonderful editor from start to finish. I hope to join him on some future project.

All writers depend on a community for sustenance, and mine has been rock solid. Many thanks to the members of the Faculty of Color Writing Group who provide me with incentive to "show up" for the work, and with fabulous camaraderie to boot. Thanks also to the Office for Equity & Diversity at the University of Minnesota for supporting our group for the past two years. To my family and friends in Saint Paul, Evanston, Washington, D.C., Chicago, Tempe, and Ann Arbor, kudos for the well-timed emails, phone calls, Facebook and face-to-face pep talks. To my twins, Will and Helena, and my life partner, Bryan, your love and understanding are priceless to me.

I presented some parts of this book to the University of Minnesota Gender, Women's & Sexuality Studies department colloquium, and work influenced by it at Arizona State University. I appreciate the warm welcome and substantive feedback I gained from each visit, and hope I did justice to the suggestions I tried to incorporate.

To close, a deep thanks to bell hooks, who continues to contribute to our most urgent debates about democracy, justice, and fairness. One book cannot do justice to the breadth and depth of your work, but I do hope that this volume provides readers in Communication Studies with a spark of the inspiration you gave me when I needed it.

one

An Introduction to bell hooks

Students, especially younger ones, may have a hard time engaging with bell hooks' early, generative works, due in part to at least two factors. First, hooks began writing at a time that may seem distant and strange: the 1980s and 1990s sparked many cultural and political controversies that continue to shape our society today, but the era may be obscure to today's graduates and undergraduates. Second, hooks has been faulted by her critics for not following traditional academic writing and research procedures. Indeed, she often does not use traditional footnotes or internal citations, nor delineate her methods in a fashion consonant with conventional research papers. One of the main goals of this book, then, is to translate her work, so to speak, for audiences more familiar with conventional academic writing. This opening chapter also aims to situate hooks in a wider historical context, providing background for readers without direct experience of the socio-political environment in which her work emerged. The book aims to present and discuss her work in a way that illuminates long-debated questions about media and society, and pose and re-frame questions about media, identity, and social justice.

This chapter begins with a brief biography of bell hooks (née Gloria Watkins), and then proceeds on a compressed tour of the cultural and political landscape from which hooks' work emerged. This is not to suggest that hooks' work is anachronistic or that she is more of a historical figure, but rather to provide readers with sufficient context to better understand the impetus for her theories and

to engage with her practice of weaving together personal reflections, pop culture references, and stories. The chapter sets the scene through a mix of biography and cultural history. This provides some background for the debates about the nature of scholarship, power, and identity that figure in hooks' writings about communication, representation, and power. I hope the introduction's format facilitates readers' engagement with her approaches to media and society.

From Gloria Watkins to bell hooks

Gloria Watkins was born in Hopkinsville, Kentucky, on September 25, 1952. Raised by her parents and grandparents, she attended segregated schools as a young child, and experienced the everyday politics and indignities of racism and sexism. Importantly, though, she remembers the efforts her elders, teachers, and other community members made to instill a sense of dignity and purpose in her and the other children. On top of this, as a child and young adult, she was witness to, and beneficiary of, the resilience and resistance that gave rise to the direct action movements that dismantled Jim Crow. She came of age during the civil rights movement, bused to the high school that used to be all-white, as she and her classmates formed the vanguard of desegregation.

Although her home life was not idyllic, she writes often about how loved she felt by members of her family, how much care she experienced under the tutelage of dear schoolteachers and neighbors.[1] Young Gloria Watkins imbibed the cultural richness of her community; even though most of the people were poor in terms of monetary wealth, she experienced the bounty of aesthetic and spiritual resources in the homeplaces she visited, in school performances, and in the games she played with her sisters and friends. Told repeatedly at a young age by her parents that she talked back too much, she seized on stories about her grandmother, bell, whose spirit someone recognized in Gloria when she spoke her mind. She recounts in many writings and interviews that she chose the alternate name "bell hooks" to honor her grandmother.

When I was a child, when I would speak harshly back to adults—talk back—they would say to me, you must be bell hooks' granddaughter. . . .

I've written so much about that sense of coming from a legacy of outspoken women, because certainly my mother's mother was a very outspoken woman. And that sense of that being a natural part of who I am.[2]

The outspoken child and voracious reader left Kentucky to attend Stanford, graduating in 1973 and moving on to the University of Wisconsin, where she earned her master's degree in 1976. She later completed her PhD at the University

1. See bell hooks' discussions of her childhood in *Outlaw Culture: Resisting Representations; Bone Black: Memories of Girlhood*, amongst other writings.
2. "In Depth with bell hooks." CSPAN Video Library. http://www.c-spanvideo.org/program/InDepthw

of California, Santa Cruz, in 1983, two years after she published her landmark book, *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism,* under the pen name bell hooks. The pseudonym and its lowercase spelling are used, she explains, to put the focus on the writing, not the identity of the writers. With this volume, hooks became part of another vanguard: black women writers whose feminist vantage points complicated and enriched an intellectual landscape heretofore dominated by white men, black men, and white women. hooks' cohort soon found their work and personas interwoven with multiple strands of political and cultural controversy and breakthroughs as the 1980s unfolded.

bell hooks and the 1980s: Culture Wars and Questioning Political Identities

Many of today's popular, nostalgic looks back at the 1980s are riffs on big hair, shoulder pads, neon, and iconic MTV videos. What is less often recalled in these fond memories of the decade are the contentious fights over the direction of American culture and politics that raged across a host of institutions, often highlighted (and distorted) on proliferating cable television channels. When *Ain't I a Woman* was first published, the terms "affirmative action baby," "racial resentment," "political correctness," "post-feminism," "do-me feminism," and "post-racial" were not yet in wide circulation or causing tempests in media teapots. But the 1980s spawned these and other contentious terms in the often raucous and uncivil debates in academic and other spheres about the changing natures and roles of media, education, and group identities in our society.[3] hooks' writings have touched on all of these areas, launching into academic and lay discourses an incisive, fiercely worded diagnosis of the ways that American history and white-dominated feminist academic circles had failed to take into account Black women's experiences.

The interest in and controversy surrounding *Ain't I a Woman* coincided with rising public interest in Black women writers. At the same time that novelists Toni Morrison (*Beloved*), Alice Walker (*The Color Purple*), and Terri McMillan (*Waiting to Exhale*) were becoming famous, Black feminists were writing cultural theory and criticism in the academy and getting attention well beyond the ivory tower as they challenged the Euro-centrism of many feminist and cultural studies texts. Books such as Michelle Wallace's *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman* and activist scholar Angela Davis' *Women, Race & Class* were often interleaved with copies of *The Bluest Eye* and *The Color Purple* on bookstore and living room shelves. Like the other women listed here, hooks became a media star, one of the

3. See also Faludi's *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women*; Dillard's *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner Now?;* Kelly's *Yo' Mama's Dysfunktional! Fighting the Culture Wars*; and Vavrus' *Postfeminist News* for thorough summaries and reflections on the wide-ranging and contentious fights over the meaning of feminism, race, and social progress that occurred in the media.