

The background of the entire page is a dense, chaotic pattern of red scribbles and brushstrokes on a black background. The scribbles are thick and expressive, creating a sense of movement and texture. The text is overlaid on this background.

bell hooks

Outlaw Culture

Outlaw Culture

'The reader discovers . . . that bell hooks is a joy to read, her work a nimbly written hybrid form of social commentary, by turns personal, political, and in-your-face.'

San Francisco Chronicle Examiner

'*Outlaw Culture* should be read, regardless of whether one agrees with feminism as presented by hooks. hooks raises critical issues that all should find engaging as well as challenging!'

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'She brings to the task of cultural criticism an astute eye and a courageous spirit . . . Hers is a voice that forces us to confront the political undercurrents of life in America.'

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Outlaw Culture

Resisting representations



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for John Amarth—stepping out on faith

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INTRODUCTION

The heartbeat of cultural revolution

From the moment I returned to living in a small town, children reentered my daily life. Before I left the racially segregated Southern town where I was born and raised, it would have been impossible for me to imagine a life that did not include the constant presence of children. In that world, being single and childless would not have deprived me of their company. Living in poor and working-class black culture, among extended family and community, it would have been seen as strange not to talk to, know, and love children. When I left that world to attend predominantly white universities for undergraduate and graduate study, each step I made on the ladder leading me to tenure and the distinguished professorship I hold today took me further away from the lives of children.

In the predominantly white world of bourgeois academic social relations, where children tend to be seen as “private

property,” it is rare to have the opportunity to form close, passionate, cross-generational, non-family-based friendships. Yet when I moved to a small town six years ago and rented a large old house with plenty of bats and a tiny bathroom (off the kitchen, with no door), children just walked back into my life. Somehow word spread around the neighborhood that I had built this bright red door leading into a tiny room with low ceilings, a perfect room for small people. Children climbed the steps up to my porch and asked to see the red door. And that is how I came to be sitting in my living room one day with two little black girls, talking about teaching and writing, telling them about cultural criticism.

At first it was hard to explain the meaning of cultural studies, the practice of cultural criticism. But then a print of Jacob Lawrence’s painting “The Lovers” beckoned to me. We were all sitting facing the wall where it hung in front of a red rocking chair. My new little girlfriends have already let me know they thought I “have a thing about the color red.” In Trinh T. Minh-ha’s exciting book on representation, *When the Moon Waxes Red*, she explains red’s lure: “At once an unlimited and profoundly subjective color, red can physio- or psychologically close in as well as open up. It points to both a person’s boundless inner voyage, and the indeterminate outer burning of the worlds of war. Through centuries, it remains the badge of revolution.” And indeed I tell the girls, “I’m into red ’cause it’s so revolutionary,” a comment that sparks intense giggles.

We begin our talk about cultural studies with the color red, with its meaning in black life. Already they know that red is a color for seduction and desire. We talk about the Lawrence painting, what they see when they really look at it—hard—hard. We talk about everything we see that we like, the way the lovers are sitting on the couch with the record player beside them, looking like they are dancing, only they are sitting down. We try and imitate them. We talk about the jet black color of their bodies and the bright red of the table next to them. Already they know

about color caste, about the way dark black color makes one less desirable. Connecting all these pieces, we find a way to understand Jacob Lawrence, desire and passion in black life. We practice culture criticism and feel the fun and excitement of learning in relation to living regular life, of using everything we already know to know more.

Merging critical thinking in everyday life with knowledge learned in books and through study has been the union of theory and practice that has informed my intellectual cultural work. Passionately concerned with education for critical consciousness, I continually search for ways to think, teach, and write that excite and liberate the mind, that passion to live and act in a way that challenges systems of domination: racism, sexism, class elitism. When I first begin working as an Assistant Professor of English and Black Studies at Yale University, I felt so limited by conventional pedagogy, by the emphasis on specialization and periodization. Doing interdisciplinary work in graduate school, I found this made me suspect—less legitimate. It threatened folks that I could be busy writing books on black women and feminism while studying medieval literature. Crossing boundaries seemed even harder as I moved up the academic hierarchy. Everyone in authority seemed to want us to stay in one place. When that crossing was coupled with progressive commitment to Left politics and a desire to write in a manner that would make my ideas accessible to a world beyond the academy, it made me feel all the more like a radical outsider, someone who only felt at home in the margins—in women’s studies and black studies where interdisciplinary work was encouraged and affirmed.

Everything changed when white male academics in the United States “discovered” cultural studies. Suddenly, much that had once been illegitimate became the rage. The work that I did—eclectic, interdisciplinary, inspired by revolutionary political visions—had an acceptable place, another home. It could fit with the cultural studies framework black British critic Stuart Hall

evoked when he declared that: “The work that cultural studies has to do is to mobilize everything that it can find in terms of intellectual resources in order to understand what keeps making the lives we live, and the societies we live in, profoundly and deeply antihuman.” Not only did I find in cultural studies a site where I could freely transgress boundaries, it was a location that enabled students to enter passionately a pedagogical process firmly rooted in education for critical consciousness, a place where they felt recognized and included, where they could unite knowledge learned in classrooms with life outside.

Combining theory and practice was the pedagogical strategy I had always used, that had inspired and motivated my teaching. It was great to have an acceptable framework to share knowledge that came from pushing against boundaries, moving out of one’s place. In their introduction to *Between Borders: Pedagogy and the Politics of Cultural Studies*, Henry Giroux and Peter McLaren emphasize the way “cultural studies 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 a condition for reasserting the relationship between agency, power, and struggle.” In the classroom, cultural criticism was the approach to learning that excited students, connecting them across race, class, gender, sexual practices, and a host of other “differences.” This excitement was intensified when the focus of critique turned to popular culture. Using this same pedagogical strategy outside the academy, I found that everyday folks from all walks of life were eager to share thoughts and talk critically about popular culture. Cultural studies was similar to Black Studies and Women’s Studies in the way it affirmed interdisciplinary work, in its acknowledgment that education is not politically neutral. But it was different in that it affirmed our right and responsibility as academics to study and write about popular culture seriously. Talking critically

about popular culture was a powerful way to share knowledge, in and outside the academy, across differences, in an oppositional and subversive way.

Even though cultural studies that looks at popular culture has the power to move intellectuals both out of the academy and into the streets where our work can be shared with a larger audience, many critical thinkers who do cultural criticism are afraid to make that move. They prefer to score points by remaining in the academic world and representing radical chic there. This is especially the case when academics feel they are less cool if they attempt to link cultural studies's intellectual practice with radical politicization. The desire to "appear cool" or "down" has led to the production of a body of cultural studies work in the United States that appropriates and rewrites the scripts and meanings of popular culture in ways that attribute to diverse cultural practices subversive, radical transgressive intent and power even when there is little evidence to suggest this is the case. This has been especially true of the academic work produced about popular icons (Madonna, for example). Voyeuristic cannibalization of popular culture by cultural critics is definitely dangerous when the intent is purely opportunistic. However, when we desire to decolonize minds and imaginations, cultural studies' focus on popular culture can be and is a powerful site for intervention, challenge, and change.

All the essays and dialogues in *Outlaw Culture: Resisting Representations* emerge from a practical engagement with cultural practices and cultural icons who are defined as on the edge, as pushing the limits, disturbing the conventional, acceptable politics of representation. Starting from the standpoint that it is not the work of cultural critics merely to affirm passively cultural practices already defined as radical or transgressive, I cross boundaries to take another look, to contest, to interrogate, and in some cases to recover and redeem. These essays reflect the desire to construct frameworks where border crossing will not be evoked simply as

a masturbatory mental exercise that condones the movement of the insurgent intellectual mind across new frontiers (another version of the jungle safari), or 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. Working with students and families from diverse class backgrounds, I am constantly amazed at how difficult it is to cross boundaries in this white supremacist, capitalist, patriarchal society. And it is obviously most difficult for individuals who lack material privilege or higher levels of education to make the elaborate shifts in location, thought, and life experience cultural critics talk and write about as though it is only a matter of individual will. To claim border crossing, the mixing of high and low, cultural hybridity, as the deepest expression of a desired cultural practice within multicultural democracy means that we must dare to envision ways such freedom of movement can be experienced by everyone. Since the disruption of the colonized/colonizer mind-set is necessary for border crossings to not simply reinscribe old patterns, we need strategies for decolonization that aim to change the minds and habits of everyone involved in cultural criticism. In these essays, I call attention to class and the myriad ways in which structures of class privilege prevent those who are not materially privileged from having access to those forms of education for critical consciousness, that are essential to the decolonization process. What does it mean for us to educate young, privileged, predominantly white students to divest of white supremacy if that work is not coupled with work that seeks to intervene in and change internalized racism that assaults people of color; to share feminist thinking and practice if that work is not coupled with fierce action; to share feminist thought and change sexism in all walks of life? To create a culture where those who could occupy the colonizing location have the freedom to self-interrogate, challenge, and change while the vast majority of the colonized lack such freedom is merely to keep in place

existing structures of domination. Politically, we do not live in a postcolonial world, because the mind-set of neo-colonialism shapes the underlying metaphysics of white supremacist capitalist patriarchy. Cultural criticism can be an agent for change, educating for critical consciousness in liberatory ways, only if we start with a mind-set and a progressive politics that is fundamentally anticolonialist, that negates cultural imperialism in all its manifestations.

Crossing borders within the academic world, moving in and out of Black Studies, Women's Studies, traditional English departments, and cultural studies, I am continually distressed by the willingness of one group to repudiate domination in one form while supporting it in another—white men who take sexism seriously but are not concerned with racism or vice versa, black men who are concerned with ending racism but do not want to challenge sexism, white women who want to challenge sexism but cling to racism, black women who want to challenge racism and sexism but claim class hierarchy. To arrive at the just, more humane world Stuart Hall envisions cultural studies as having the power to help create, we must be willing to courageously surrender participation in whatever sphere of coercive hierarchical domination we enjoy individual and group privilege. Given that cultural fascism is on the rise, that there is such open demand for separatist politics, embracing notions of inclusion and exclusion, whether based on shared gender, race, or nationality, seriously impedes all progressive effort to create a culture where border crossing enables both the sharing of resources and the production of a culture of communalism and mutuality. The fierce willingness to repudiate domination in a holistic manner is the starting point for progressive cultural revolution. Cultural criticism can be and is a vital location for the exchange of knowledge, or the formation of new epistemologies.

As I pondered the fascination those children of diverse gender, race/ethnicity, nationality, class, and as yet undeclared sexual

practice expressed about the red door, I began to think about the politics of space. This door led into a room designed for small bodies: everything in reach, nothing placed to intimidate or threaten. Although I was unable to conjure clear memories, I tried to remember my relationship to space as a child, the ways the break with dependency on grown-ups or older, bigger siblings and the assertion of one's own agency was a declaration of freedom and power. I remember thinking—and, like all cultural critics who are children, sharing my observation with the world around me—that if I had the power, I would make everything in the world be the right size for children, and grown-ups would have to learn how to do everything differently. In many ways progressive cultural revolution can happen only as we learn to do everything differently. Decolonizing our minds and imaginations, we learn to think differently, to see everything with “the new eyes” Malcolm X told us we needed if we were to enter the struggle as subjects and not objects. These essays and dialogues represent my ongoing growth as artist, cultural critic, feminist theorist, writer, seeker on the path. Contrary to convention, I almost always first imagine a collection of essays I want to write and then produce them as cultural events excite my imagination. Some of my essays appear first in magazines, because I am eager to spread the message, get critical feedback, and to speak to and with diverse audiences; publishing work in multiple locations makes that possible. The work in *Outlaw Culture* often begins where earlier published work stopped; at times it may repeat for emphasis and remembrance. Though I see it as all connected, each piece has a different take on culture and reality. Polyphonic, it combines the many voices I speak—academic talk, standard English, vernacular patois, the language of the street. Celebrating and affirming insurgent intellectual cultural practice, it is symbolically a red door—an invitation to enter a space of changing thought, the open mind that is the heartbeat of cultural revolution.

1

POWER TO THE PUSSY

We don't wannabe dicks in drag

I believe in the power of Madonna, that she has the balls to be the patron saint of new feminism.

—Kate Tentler, *The Village Voice*

In my twenties, I made my first pilgrimage to Europe. Journeying there was a necessary initiation for any young artist in the United States destined to lead a Bohemian life of intensity, a life on the edge, full of adventure. Nothing about being black, female, working class, growing up in a racially segregated Southern town, where the closest I ever came to ecstasy was during Sunday morning church service, made me think that the doors of avant-garde radical cool would be closed to me. Confined and restrained by family, region, and religion, I was inwardly homeless, suffering, I believed, from a heartbreaking estrangement from a divine community of radical artistic visionaries whom I imagined were longing for me to join them.

In much pain, I spent my childhood years dreaming of the moment when I would find my way home. In my imagination, home was a place of radical openness, of recognition and reconciliation, where one could create freely.

Europe was a necessary starting place for this search. I believed I would not find there the dehumanizing racism so pervasive here that it crippled black creativity. The Europe of my imagination was a place of artistic and cultural freedom, where there were no limits or boundaries. I had learned about this Europe in books, in the writings of black expatriates. Yet this was not the Europe I discovered. The Europe I journeyed to was a place where racism was ever present, only it took the form of a passion for the "primitive," the "exotic." When a friend and I arrived in Paris, a taxi driver took us to a hotel where pictures of nude black females adorned the walls. Everywhere, I encountered the acceptance and celebration of blackness as long as it remained within the confines of primitivism.

Ironically, white Europeans were constantly urging me to join them in their affirmation of Europe as a more free, less racist, more culturally open place than the United States. At some point I was told that Europeans, unlike white Americans, had no trouble worshipping a black Madonna; this was proof that their culture was able to move beyond race and racism. Indeed, European friends insisted that I make a pilgrimage to Montserrat to see for myself. At the shrine of the Black Madonna I saw long lines of adoring white worshippers offering homage. They were praying, crying, longing to caress and touch, to be blessed by this mysterious black woman saint. In their imaginations her presence was the perfect embodiment of the miraculous. To be with her was to be in the place of ecstasy. Indeed, momentarily in this sanctuary, race, class, gender, and nationality had fallen away. In their place was a vision of hope and possibility. Yet this moment in no way altered the politics of domination outside, in that space of the real. Only in the realm of the sacred imaginary was

there the possibility of transcendence. None of us could remain there.

My journey ended. I did not return home to become a Bohemian artist. My creative work, painting and writing, was pushed to the background as I worked hard to succeed in the academy, to become something I had never wanted to be. To this day I feel as imprisoned in the academic world as I felt in the world of my growing up. And I still cling to the dream of a radical visionary artistic community that can sustain and nurture creativity.

I share these memories and reflections as a preface to talking about Madonna as a cultural icon, to contextualize what she has represented for me. Early on, I was enamored of her not so much because I was “into” her music—I was into her presence. Her image, like that of the Black Madonna, evoked a sense of promise and possibility, a vision of freedom; feminist in that she was daring to transgress sexist boundaries; Bohemian in that she was an adventurer, a risk taker; daring in that she presented a complex, non-static ever-changing subjectivity. She was intense, into pleasure, yet disciplined. For me and many other young “hip” feminist women confined in the academy, Madonna was a symbol of unrepressed female creativity and power—sexy, seductive, serious, and strong. She was the embodiment of that radical risk-taking part of my/our female self that had to be repressed daily for us to make it in the institutionalized world of the mainstream, in the academy. For a long while, her transgressive presence was a beacon, a guiding light, charting the journey of female “feminist” artists coming to power—coming to cultural fulfillment.

These days, watching Madonna publicly redefine her persona away from this early politicized image of transgressive female artistry necessarily engenders in diverse feminist admirers feelings of betrayal and loss. We longed to witness the material girl enter mature womanhood still embodying a subversive feminist

spirit. We longed for this, in part, to see serious radical female cultural icons manifesting the feminist promise that sexism would not always limit, inform, and shape our cultural identities and destiny. Deep down, many feminist Madonna admirers, ourselves entering mature womanhood, fear that this transition will signal the end of all forms of radicalism—social, sexual, cultural. We have so needed her transgressions. Women struggling to maintain fierce commitment to radical feminist womanhood in the face of a culture that rewards betrayal want to have a feminist icon who stands against the patriarchy, who “fights the power.” For a long time, Madonna appeared to be that icon. Since feminist thinking and the feminist movement are currently undermined by intense backlash, we long for female icons who show everyone that we can triumph despite fierce antifeminism. Ultimately, we know that feminist transformation of culture and society is even more directly threatened when those who were once advocates, supporters of feminist demands for an end to sexism and sexist oppression, act as though this is no longer a necessary and crucial agenda. Hence, our collective lament when it appears that Madonna will not fulfill that earlier sense of feminist promise and power.

Currently, Madonna is redefining her public persona in a manner that negates and erases her earlier support for feminist issues. The first hint of this major about-face was made public in the October 1992 issue of *Vanity Fair* with its display of Madonna as little-girl sex kitten. A frightening gap separated the radical vision of active female sexuality Madonna projects in the *Vanity Fair* interview with Maureen Orth (evocatively titled “The Material Girl’s Sexual (R)Evolution”) and the boring, conventional kiddie-porn type photographs accompanying the text. The image of a grown, over thirty, Madonna recreating herself as a little-girl sex kitten, presumably for the thrill of gaining and holding onto the sustained mass patriarchal pornographic gaze for as long as she can keep the public’s attention, exposes the

way female aging in a sexist society can undermine any woman's allegiance to radical politics, to feminism. What is the "material girl" to do when she has fast become a grown woman in an economy of cultural images where so much of her mass appeal was deeply rooted in the romance of rebellious youth? The re-creation of herself as little girl comes across primarily as an opportunistic attempt to sustain the image that she can be forever young. Starting over again as little-girl-on-the-playground sex symbol, Madonna abandons and betrays her earlier radical questioning of sexist objectifications of female sexuality, announcing via these photos that she consents to being represented within a field of image production that is over-determined by patriarchy and the needs of a heterosexist pornographic gaze.

Gone is the "hot" Madonna who dares to challenge the status quo. There is nothing "fierce" or even interesting about the *Vanity Fair* photographs. And they do not evoke in me fierce response. Looking at them I just simply felt sad. After all her daring, her courageous challenging of sexist constructions of female sexuality, Madonna at the peak of her power has stopped pushing against the system. Her new image has no radical edge. The loss of that subversive style is all the more evident in *Sex*. Suddenly, nothing about Madonna's image is politicized. Instead, with the publication of *Sex*, she assumes the role of high priestess of a cultural hedonism that seeks to substitute unlimited production and pursuit of sexual pleasure for a radical, liberating political practice, one that would free our minds and our bodies.

Sex pushes pervasive hedonism as an alternative to resistance. The shifting radical subjectivity that was the quintessential trademark of Madonna's earlier opposition to conformist fixed identity was a daring to be different that was not expressive of shallow exhibitionism but of a will to confront, challenge, and change the status quo. I remember Madonna flaunting sexual assertiveness in early videos like "Material Girl," telling *Nightline*

that she drew the line at violence, humiliation, and degradation of women. It is this subject position that has disappeared. As Susan Bordo reminds us in her essay “Material Girl: The Effacements of Postmodern Culture,” that will to be different “is won through ongoing political struggle rather than through the act of creative interpretation.” Ironically, it is precisely at this cultural moment when Madonna allies herself with the status quo that she insists on identifying herself as radical, declaring, “I see myself as a revolutionary at this point.” She asserts her belief that *Sex* will function politically, that it will “open some people’s minds,” presumably that it will lead viewers to accept and condone various sexual practices. The irony is, of course, that for those viewers who have always consumed a range of patriarchal pornographic material and/or progressive erotica, *Sex* offers no new images. Every time I open *Sex* I am reminded of a high school yearbook. The layout and design appear amateurish. The constant changing of typeface and style evoke memories of meetings about my high school yearbook where we agreed that anything goes and to let everyone’s desires be represented. This casual effect seems highly intentional in *Sex*. Where the faces of graduating seniors and their classmates might be, Madonna gives us diverse sexual images, many of which look as though they have been appropriated from *Players*, *Playboy*, *On Our Backs*, and so on, with of course one special difference—they all feature Madonna.

While this in-your-face collection of porn and erotica may seduce a mass public (particularly an audience of teenaged consumers) that might never have gone seeking these images in the many other places where they could be found, it is doubtful that it will change anyone’s view about sexual practices. Despite Madonna’s hype that would have the public believe she is the radical visionary introducing transgressive subject matter to a mass audience, the reality is that advertisements, videos, movies, and television were already exploiting these images. Madonna is

really only a link in the marketing chain that exploits representations of sexuality and the body for profit, a chain which focuses on images that were once deemed “taboo.” Not wanting to undermine her own hype, the material girl must argue that her images are different—original. The major difference, of course, is that the space she occupies as cultural entertainer and icon enables her to reach a much larger audience than traditional consumers of pornographic images or progressive erotica. Despite her hopes of radical intervention, the vast majority of readers seem to approach *Sex* like conventional consumers of pornography. The book is used to sexually excite, provoke, or stimulate voyeuristic masturbatory pleasure. Nothing radical about that.

The most radical aspect of *Sex* is its appropriation and use of homoerotic imagery. This use is not unique. Commenting on the way these acts of appropriation have become a new trend, *Newsweek*'s review of *Sex* asserted:

As gay-bashing has become one of the most common hate-crimes in America, gay iconography is bubbling up defiantly in mainstream media. Since Madonna first cast herself as Marilyn Monroe, she has played out the role of drag queen, using identity as a form of self-defense. In exchange for her genuine affection, she's raided gay sub-culture's closet for the best of her ideas . . . she isn't just taking explicit sex mainstream; she is taking explicit homosexual mainstream. In this she is a pioneer. Hard as it is to imagine a major celebrity of another era making a book as graphic as *Sex*, and surviving—it's impossible to imagine anyone making one as gay.

In other words, within today's cannibalistic market economy the willingness to consume homoerotic and/or homosexual images does not correspond to a cultural willingness to stand against homophobia or challenge heterosexism.

Patriarchal pornography has always appropriated and exploited homoeroticism. Within the larger context of pornographic sexual hedonism anything goes, and all taboos become part of the pleasure mix. This experience does not mean that the individuals consuming these images are not fiercely committed to maintaining heterosexism and perpetuating homophobia. Voyeuristic desire to look at, or experience through fantasy, sexual practices that in one's everyday life might be perceived as taboo does not signal a rupture in the sexual status quo. That is why simply portraying these images, mass marketing them to a larger public, is in and of itself not a subversive intervention, though in some instances it may have a disruptive challenging impact.

Throughout Madonna's career she has appropriated fascinating aspects of gay subcultures even as she has often framed gay experience in a stereotypically heterosexist and homophobic manner. (An example of this tendency is her insistence in the film *Truth or Dare* that her dancers, most of whom are gay and nonwhite, are "emotional cripples" who need her to "play mother," guiding and disciplining them.) This kind of maternal/paternalism fits with a history of so-called sympathetic heterosexual framing of homosexual experience in popular culture which represents it as deviant, subversive, wild, a "horror" that is both fascinating and fun but always fundamentally a "horror."

This unsubversive manner of representation jumps out from the pages of *Sex*. The initial pictures of Madonna with two lesbian sex radicals portrays them in scenarios that visually construct them as freaks. In various shots Madonna is positioned in relation to them in a manner that insists on the primacy of her image as the embodiment of a heterosexual norm, "the ideal feminine." Visually placed in several photographs as voyeur and/or victim, she is at the center and the lesbian couple always marginalized. Homophobic constructions of gay sexual practice in mass media consistently reinforce the stereotypical notion that gay folks are predators, eager to feast upon the innocent.

Madonna is the symbol of innocence; the two lesbian women represent experience. Unlike her, they do not have firm, hard bodies, or wear on their faces the freshly made-up, well-fed, all-American look. One of the most powerful nonerotic or pornographic images in this sequence shows Madonna at a distance from the two women, looking anguished, as though she does not belong, as though being in their presence hurts. A study in contrast, Madonna consistently appears in these images as though she is with them but not of them. Posed in this way, her presence invites status quo readers to imagine that they too can consume images of difference, participate in the sexual practices depicted, and yet remain untouched—unchanged.

Embodying the highest expression of capitalist patriarchal pornographic power, Madonna emerges in *Sex* as the penultimate sexual voyeur. She looks, then asks that we look at her looking. Since all the while the reader of her opening remarks knows that we are not really seeing documentary photos but a carefully constructed sexual stage, we can never forget that our gaze is directed, controlled. We have paid for our right to look, just as Madonna has paid the two women to appear with her. Our gaze must always and only be directed at what she wants us to see. And this means that what appears to be a portrait of homoeroticism/homosexuality is merely a reflection of her voyeuristic perspective. It is that overdetermining perspective that shapes and informs the image of gay sexual practice we are allowed to see.

Within the sphere of Madonna's pornographic gaze, gayness is reinscribed as a trope within the cultural narrative of patriarchal pornographic sexual hedonism. The gayness presented throughout *Sex* does not call for a recognition and acceptance of difference. It is instead a demand that difference be appropriated in a manner that diffuses its power. Hence, the consuming voyeuristic pornographic gaze violates the gay body and being by suggesting, via the mode of appropriation, that the site of

interrogation must always rest not with the homoerotic/homosexual presence but with a heterosexual center. Gayness then appears as merely an extension of heterosexual pleasure, part of that practice and not an alternative or fundamentally different expression of sexual desire.

Ultimately, images of homosexuality in *Sex*, though presented as never before to a mainstream audience, are not depicted in a manner that requires viewers to show any allegiance to, or understanding of, the context from which they emerge. Indeed, they are presented as though they come into being through the heterosexual imagination, thereby enabling heterosexual and/or homophobic audiences to share in Madonna's voyeuristic relations, looking into and at "gayness," without connecting that pleasure to any resistance struggle for gay rights, to any demand that they relinquish heterosexist power. As with the opening pages, the image of Madonna in a gay club surrounded by men evokes a will to violate—to enter a space that is at the very least symbolically, if not actually, closed—off limits. Even in the realm of male homoeroticism/homosexuality, Madonna's image usurps, takes over, subordinates. Coded always in *Sex* as heterosexual, her image is the dominant expression of heterosexism. Mirroring the role of a plantation overseer in a slave-based economy, Madonna surveys the landscape of sexual hedonism, her "gay" freedom, her territory of the other, her jungle. No break with stereotypes here. And more importantly, no critical interrogation of the way in which these images perpetuate and maintain institutionalized homophobic domination. In the context of *Sex*, gay culture remains irrevocably linked to a system of patriarchal control framed by a heterosexist pornographic gaze.

Just as representations of gayness are not problematized in *Sex* neither is S/M. No longer an underground happening, S/M scenarios are among the sexual taboos exploited for profit. Such scenarios are now commonly enacted on prime time television

shows and in movies. Yet none of what we see in mainstream media (*Sex* is no exception) shows images of sex radicals who are committed to a vision of sexual pleasure that rests on mutual consent. Consent comes through communication. Yet the S/M we see both in mainstream media and in *Sex* is not about consent. It is the subject-to-subject dimension of S/M that is lost when symbols of these sexual practices are appropriated to shock or titillate. None of Madonna's fictive S/M monologues foreground issues of agreement and consent. In both images and written text, S/M is represented solely as being about punishment. Narrow notions of sexual sadomasochism fail to characterize it as a sexual ritual that "works" issues of pain and power. Whatever the degree of punishment present, the point is ultimately pleasure.

In her all-knowing rap on S/M, Madonna assumes the role of teacher/authority, giving us truth learned from an authentic source: "I talked to a dominatrix once and she said the definition of S/M was that you let someone hurt you who you know would never hurt you. It's always a mutual choice. You have an unstated agreement between you." Yet in Madonna's mind the choice is always to hurt or be hurt. It is this perversion of sex-radical practice that informs her assertion: "I don't even think S/M is about sex. I think it's about power, the struggle for power." While S/M is about power, it's about negotiation—the antithesis of competitive struggle.

By placing herself in the role of instructor and selling *Sex* as a how-to manual, Madonna dangerously usurps the progressive voices and bodies of diverse individuals engaged in S/M sexual practice. Her most reactionary take on S/M connotes heterosexual male violence against women with consensual sado-masochism. Prefacing her brief discussion of S/M, Madonna asserts:

I think for the most part if women are in an abusive relationship and they know it and they stay in it, they must be digging it. I

suppose some people might think that's an irresponsible statement. I'm sure there are a lot of women in abusive relationships who don't want to be, who are trapped economically; they have all these kids and they have to deal with it. But I have friends who have money and are educated and they stay in abusive relationships, so they must be getting something out of it.

Revealing that she is no expert on domestic violence, Madonna flaunts her ignorance with the same seductive arrogance of sexist men who have used the same faulty logic to condone, support, and perpetuate violence against women.

More than any visual image in *Sex*, these remarks signal Madonna's break with feminist thinking. Reflecting a patriarchal standpoint, these statements are more than just irresponsible; they are dangerous. Madonna uses her position as cultural icon to sanction violence against women. And the tragedy of it all is that these statements are inserted in an utterly gratuitous manner. They are in no way connected to the visual images of heterosexual S/M. By making them, Madonna uses *Sex* as a platform to express right-wing antifeminist sentiments that, if uttered in another context, might have provoked public protest and outrage.

Concluding her declaration with the insistence that "the difference between abuse and S/M is the issue of responsibility," Madonna neatly deflects attention away from the real issue of "choice." To focus on choice rather than responsibility she would have had to acknowledge that within patriarchal culture, where male domination of women is promoted and male physical and sexual abuse of women is socially sanctioned, no open cultural climate exists to promote consensual heterosexual power play in any arena, including the sexual. Few women have the freedom to choose an S/M sexual practice in a heterosexual relationship. Contrary to Madonna's assertions, female class

power rarely mediates male violence, even though it may offer a means of escape. No doubt Madonna knows this, but she is more concerned with courting and seducing an antifeminist public, a misogynist sexist audience that makes exactly the same pronouncements about women and abuse. A similar critique could be made of Madonna's comments on pornography.

Madonna's appropriation of gayness as the sign of transgression, as well as her preoccupation with S/M, usually deflects attention away from her use of racially charged imagery. Critics who applaud the way she draws mainstream attention to gay sexuality say nothing about the issue of race. Yet the cultural narrative of white supremacy is woven throughout the visual and written text of *Sex*. Despite her personal history as a dark ethnic from an immigrant background, Madonna's mega-success is tied to her representation as a blond. By assuming the mantle of Marilyn Monroe, she publicly revealed her longing to leave behind the experience of her ethnic and bodily history to inhabit the cultural space of the white feminine ideal. In his essay "White," film critic Richard Dyer describes the way Hollywood's idealization of white femininity converges with aesthetic standards informed by white supremacy. Emphasizing that the image of Monroe "is an inescapably and necessarily white one," Dyer calls attention to the fact that "the codes of glamour lighting in Hollywood were developed in relation to white women, to endow them with a glow and radiance that has correspondence with the transcendental rhetoric of popular Christianity." Significantly, only "white"-skinned females could be imagined as innocent, virtuous, transcendent. This fact affirms my white European friends' assertion that there is no cultural space within the United States that would allow white folks to deify black femaleness, to worship a black Madonna. Racism and sexism combine to make it impossible for white folks, and even some black folks, to imagine a black Madonna, since such figures are representations of purity and innocence.

Within racist and sexist iconography the black female is stereotypically portrayed as experienced and impure. Hence, she can never embody that Birth-of-a-Nation fragile womanhood that is the essence of a Madonna figure.

Within white supremacist culture, a female must be white to occupy the space of sacred femininity, and she must also be blond. Prior to the shooting of images in *Sex*, Madonna had returned to her natural dark hair color. Yet workers helping to construct her public persona insisted that she bleach her hair blond. *Entertainment Weekly* reported that Madonna was reluctant, but was told by her make-up artist: "This is your book. If you want to be a brunette, fine. But in black and white, blond magnifies better. Blond says more!" Blond speaks, says more, when it both mirrors and embodies the white supremacist aesthetics that inform the popular imagination of our culture. Concurrently, Madonna's appropriation of the identity of the European actress Dita and of her Germanic couture is an obvious gesture connecting her to a culture of fascism, Nazism, and white supremacy, particularly as it is linked to sexual hedonism.

Madonna embodies a social construction of "whiteness" that emphasizes purity, pure form. Indeed, her willingness to assume the Marilyn Monroe persona affirms her investment in a cultural vision of white that is tied to imperialism and colonial domination. The conquest of light over dark replays the drama of white supremacist domination of the Native American, African, and so on. In that representation of whiteness, Dyer asserts, "being white is coterminous with the endless plenitude of human diversity." He explains: "If we are to see the historical, cultural, and political implications (to put it mildly) of white world domination, it is important to see similarities, typicalities within the seemingly infinite variety of white representation." At the start of her career, the "whiteness" that Madonna flaunted was represented as other than, different from the mainstream, more connected to the reality of folks marginalized by race or sexual

practice. For a time, Madonna seemed to desire to occupy both that space of whiteness that is different and the space that is familiar. Different, she is the young Italian white girl wanting to be black. Familiar, she is Marilyn Monroe, the ultimate cultural icon of white female beauty, purity, and sensuality.

Increasingly, Madonna occupies the space of the white cultural imperialist, talking on the mantle of the white colonial adventurer moving into the wilderness of black culture (gay and straight), of white gay subculture. Within these new and different realms of experience she never divests herself of white privilege. She maintains both the purity of her representation and her dominance. This is especially evident in *Sex*. In stories of sexual adventures told in *Sex*, people of color appear as primary protagonists. In one, the young Puerto Rican boy virgin is the "object" of the fictive Dita/Madonna's lust. We are told: "He was fearless. He would do anything . . . I was so turned on; it was probably the most erotic sex I ever had. But he gave me crabs." The stereotypes here are obvious, a fact which makes them no less damaging. Madonna's text constructs a narrative of pure white womanhood contaminated by contact with the colored "other." It would be easy to dismiss this construction as merely playful if it were not so consistent throughout *Sex*. In another adventure story, an apparently well-off white male enters a fancy department store where he is seduced by a Cuban salesgirl. She is, of course, as stereotype would have it, hot and whorish, ready to cheat on her boyfriend when any anonymous "desiring" white man looks her way. The structure of this narrative suggests that it, like the previous one, appeals directly to white supremacist sexual fantasies.

Though *Sex* appears to be culturally diverse, people of color are strategically located, always and only in a subordinate position. Our images and culture appear always in a context that mirrors racist hierarchies. We are always present to serve white desire. And while *Sex* exploits the myth of jungle fever, Madonna

is carefully positioned within a visual framework where the big black man and the black woman appear as a couple who are her sexual servants; no readers could imagine that Madonna is partnering herself with a black male. No, all her images of conventional heterosexual coupling are with “nice” white boys. Black female sexuality is stereotypically represented as degraded. In the much-remarked and visually powerful come shot, Madonna stands over the prostrate naked body of black female model Naomi Campbell (not an anonymous fantasy image) and mimics a golden shower, by squirting lotion on the reclining figure. This image conveys a serious visual message about race, gender, and nationality. Madonna can be seen here as representing the imperialism of the United States, its triumph over Britain (Campbell is British Caribbean) as well as the conquest of “exotic” black cultures. Campbell has been called by the white-dominated fashion media the new Josephine Baker, a persona which directly contrasts that of idealized white womanhood. As the celebrated “primitive” icon, she must learn her place in relation to the white mistress and master. To conquer and subordinate this representation of “wild black sexuality,” Madonna must occupy a phallic position. In keeping with sexist/racist iconography, the black female is symbolically subordinated by white male power; in this case it is Madonna assuming the white supremacist patriarchal role.

Throughout *Sex*, Madonna appears as the white imperialist wielding patriarchal power to assert control over the realm of sexual difference. None of this is mitigated by the recognition—emphasized by Madonna herself—that gender is an act of social construction. Nor can Madonna’s disguises, however richly layered, ultimately mask her violence and cruelty towards women. Discussing gender parity, Carol-Anne Tyler (“Boys Will Be Girls: The Politics of Gay Drag”) suggests that the male drag queen’s femininity is “a put on, not the real thing, signalling he has what women like, the phallus.” Though Madonna, of course,