

CHAPTER 9

WHAT'S LOVE GOT TO DO WITH IT?

Creating Art, Creating Community, Creating a Better World

Tracey Nicholls

What's love got to do with social aesthetics? With improvisation? And with otherness? One way to think about aesthetics in relation to the social world is through consideration of the extent to which one's membership in community—that is, one's social identity—shapes one's approach to art making and art appreciation. Conversely, we might consider how one's relationship to art shapes one's social identity. These kinds of questions are shaping the emergent discourses in relational aesthetics, founded and labeled by the French art critic Nicolas Bourriaud, and social aesthetics, exemplified by the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's (1984) critical rebuttal of Kantian aesthetics on the grounds that “taste” is not a universal trait that identifies a single standard of artistic merit but is instead indexed to one's class position. Similar ways of looking at oneself and at others are also examined in bell hooks's *Art on My Mind: Visual Politics* (1995a), a book that is not typically considered part of these discourses, despite its treatment of these questions from a perspective that is fundamentally compatible with the concerns of social aesthetics.

Art on My Mind, hooks's approach to art making and art appreciation, is worth investigating in any discussion of aesthetics that implicates issues of identity and otherness, in part because of the slippage between the identity hooks claims for herself and the identity attributed to her by others. In the book's first chapter, hooks identifies herself both as a member of a working-class African American community and as an artist and art critic who is

deeply committed to the project of expanding the art world to include the voices and perspectives of marginalized others. But the fierce commitment to art that permeates the book is not widely acknowledged as “the public face” of bell hooks. The reviewer Brian Wallis (1995) notes in his assessment of *Art on My Mind* that hooks is not widely acknowledged as an art critic, even though she has woven aesthetic judgments and considerations into much of her writing.¹ Because she is typically taken to be commenting on sociopolitical matters of race, decolonization, and liberation, her attention to aesthetics is overlooked, and as a result, an identity she wishes to claim for herself disappears. This eliding of her self-image—be it accidental slip-page or deliberate erasure—makes hooks an interestingly subaltern voice on matters of art and culture and figures prominently in the questions of domination and decolonization that I raise later in this chapter.

On my way to those questions, and by way of explaining why I think hooks is being seriously misrepresented by those who cast her as someone whose social philosophy has nothing to say about aesthetics, I want to explore the view of art making and art appreciation that she develops in *Art on My Mind* and draw connections to the “ethic of love” that she develops in other writings. The view of art making that emerges from this book is, in many respects, a valorization of improvisatory practices. It is, to be sure, a mostly implicit valorization, as she devotes little attention to the art form most closely associated with improvisation: music. No doubt, this lack of attention to music and the other performing arts is the result of her concern in *Art on My Mind* with the plastic arts, in particular—as the subtitle unambiguously telegraphs—the visual arts. Certainly, hooks does analyze the social significance of African American music making in other works. Notably, in *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black*, hooks (1989, 11) attributes to “black musicians like Duke Ellington, Louis Armstrong, and later John Coltrane” the imparted awareness that it is possible to speak with multiple voices. They “impressed upon our consciousness a sense of versatility,” she observes, “[through playing] all kinds of music.” But even in *Art on My Mind*, with all of its focus on arts not normally enumerated in discussions of improvising, there is an insistence on perspectives and practices that I argue are consistent with the theorization of improvisation as a social practice. The convergence between her notion of art as a populist concern and improvisation as a site of theorizing social relations lies in attitudes of openness toward contingent inspiration and in the possibilities of political resistance that both reveal.

Everyday Art Making, Popular Empowerment, and Improvisation

As a way into her discussion of the visual politics of art, hooks recalls that what drew her to painting in her youth was its formal properties, the abstract independence from social concerns that warrants the claim that “art has no race or gender” (hooks 1995a, xi). This is admittedly an odd way to start a book on “the place of art in black life, connections between the social construction of black identity, the impact of race and class, and the presence in black life of an inarticulate but ever-present visual aesthetic governing our relationship to images, to the process of image-making” (57). Her claim about the artwork’s independence, in this context, can, I think, only be motivated by a desire to open up our ideas about who can be a producer of art. Understanding social aesthetics as a concept that occupies the space in which the aesthetic and the political overlap, I argue in this section that hooks’s attention to the beauty of everyday objects and crafts—her “aesthetics of the ordinary”—is a basic component of her project of making space within aesthetic discourse for the artistic practices and preferences of people who are not legitimized within an institutional theory of art and art making.

Thinking about art and its place—or lack of place—in black communities, however, hooks (1995a, 3–4) speculates that the problem runs much deeper than under-representation of black artists in galleries. “Most black folks,” she contends, “do not believe that the presence of art in our lives is essential to our collective well-being” (3). This attitude has historical roots, she claims, “with respect to black political life, in black liberation struggles—whether early protests against white supremacy and racism during slavery and Reconstruction, during the civil rights movement, or during the more recent black power movements—the production of art and the creation of a politics of the visual that would not only affirm artists but also see the development of an aesthetics of viewing as central to claiming subjectivity have been consistently devalued” (3).² Although she grew up passionately interested in art, this attitude was considered odd by many of her family members, she recalls. It was, therefore, an amazing experience for her when she visited the museums and galleries of Paris and found so much African art in them. “It occurred to me then,” she writes, “that if one could make a people lose touch with their capacity to create, lose sight of their will and their power to make art, then the work of subjugation, of colonization, is complete” (xv).

It is worth noting here that the problem hooks is identifying is fairly

medium-specific, at least insofar as what she is implicitly excluding; the indifference to art that she attributes to African American communities is an indifference to visual arts, not music. As I think will become clearer in the discussion that follows, she is particularly concerned with visual arts, and not music, because of the role representations of African Americans play in the development of self-image—a point true of people generally, of course, but it is the decolonization of African Americans that motivates hooks's analysis. She does not make an explicit distinction between visual art and music as different types of art forms, but I think we might see both her concern with representation and her relative silence on the topic of music (in this book, at least) as implicitly committing her to a taxonomy that sorts visual arts as representational and musical arts as expressive. Alternatively, this inattention to music may flow from a practical consideration concerning suppression of art forms: it is harder to stop a colonized people from singing than it is to stop them from painting; to paint requires materials to which economically deprived people may not have access, and to paint produces objects that may be destroyed.³ To restore the sense that visual art really matters, "For more black folks to identify with art," hooks (1995a, 4) writes, "we must shift conventional ways of thinking about the function of art. There must be a revolution in the way we see, the way we look [to] stimulate collective awareness that the creation and public sharing of art is essential to any practice of freedom."

This collective awareness, which she thinks can be stimulated by promoting art making within the community—notably, through a strong and wide-reaching commitment to art programs in public schools—should aim to elicit popular participation, to instill the idea that, theoretically, anyone can be a maker of art. In part, this awareness can be nurtured through attention to the aesthetic values and practices that are still, or already, present in everyday life. This is the compelling point of *Art on My Mind*: hooks wants to highlight the extent to which African American communities have consistently maintained aesthetic visions, values, and practices, even as members of these communities might be tempted to dismiss "capital-A art" as an activity meaningless to and disconnected from their lives. It is in African American communities, hooks (1995a, 19) argues, that we see "a concern with the soul . . . that black people have consistently highlighted and shared with mainstream white culture. The aesthetic vision of 'soul music' was precisely one in which a need to care for the soul was foregrounded." Concern with the soul, which she sees as being "situated within the context of everyday life," is a common element she identifies in the work of many

of the particular artists she writes about in *Art on My Mind* (20, 24, 49). We see her touching on issues in social aesthetics, for instance, when she writes about the work of installation and photography artist Felix Gonzalez-Torres, whose work stresses “the moment of experience, of human interaction,”—that is, sociality, relationality—and insists that “elegance and ecstasy are to be found in daily life, in our habits of being, in the ways we regard one another and the world around us” (49).⁴ hooks describes Gonzalez-Torres’s work as one might describe improvised musical performances; it “welcomes our presence, our participation . . . , [which] is made more manifest by the spaces left vacant in the work that leave room for us” (50).

She links the work and the vision of these professional artists—Gonzalez-Torres, Alison Saar, Jean-Michel Basquiat, among others—to the aesthetic lessons she learned as a child in rural Kentucky: the extent to which simplicity and utility could reveal aesthetic qualities of otherwise overlooked objects. She remembers her community as having had “a shared belief in the idea that beautiful things . . . were necessary for the spirit. The more down-trodden and unfortunate the circumstances, the more ‘beauty’ was needed to uplift, to offer a vision of hope, to transform” (hooks 1995a, 120). This recognition of a need for beauty in one’s life ranged across classes, and the need could be filled in diverse ways. For her parents and many of the other adults she knew as a child, the need for beauty was satisfied in “objects that could be considered luxurious, that were expensive and difficult to own,” but there were also people like her grandparents who opposed materialism and sought beauty “in a world that was not subject to monetary exchange” (120). Quoting Alice Walker’s reminiscence of her mother’s flower garden in her essay “In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens,” hooks describes this non-materialistic everyday attention to aesthetics that she learned most comprehensively from her grandmother as “a legacy of respect . . . for all that illuminates and cherishes life” (120; 2009, 121).

This quiet, respectful, everyday aesthetic is one that hooks associates explicitly with a democratization of art, achieved through popular participation. Democratization, to the extent that it exists, has been accomplished through art media to which ordinary people have access, such as photography. This medium is significant, hooks tells us, because “the history of black liberation movements in the United States could be characterized as a struggle over images as much as it has also been a struggle for rights, for equal access. . . . Cameras gave to black folks, irrespective of class, a means by which we could participate fully in the production of images. Hence it is essential that any theoretical discussion of the relationship of black life to

the visual, to art making, make photography central. Access and mass appeal have historically made photography a powerful location for the construction of an oppositional black aesthetic” (hooks 1995a, 57). “Had the camera been there when slavery ended,” she writes—by which she means, of course, had it been *available to African Americans*⁵—“it could have provided images that would have helped folks searching for lost kin and loved ones. . . . Half a century later . . . black folks . . . became passionately obsessed with the camera . . . because it offered a way to contain memories, to overcome loss, to keep history” (60). Because it gave ordinary black people a way to preserve the histories of their families and communities, and because it gave them a way to resist and oppose the racist misrepresentations of them that circulated in the white-dominated world outside their segregated communities, the “camera became in black life a political instrument,” says hooks (60). The resulting walls of family photos that were on display in all of the houses of hooks’s childhood “were essential to the process of decolonization,” she asserts. “To enter black homes in my childhood was to enter a world that valued the visual, that asserted our collective will to participate in a noninstitutionalized curatorial process” (61).

Popular participation in the production of art offered the opportunity for more than political resistance, however important that may have been. The accepted practice of building one’s own house democratized architecture and encouraged improvisatory strategies such as contingent expansion in response to immediate needs rather than preplanning. Another process both artistic and practical that allows us to read improvisation onto it is the quilt making at which hooks’s grandmother excelled and through which she articulated her own vernacular aesthetic. Women who exercise their creativity by sewing these necessary household items draw inspiration for their artistic production out of materials that are contingently there—for instance, reusing scraps of fabric from old clothes to make “crazy quilts” (hooks 2009, 158). hooks acknowledges Cynthia Redick’s thesis that these “folk art” objects originated as a late-nineteenth-century fad among privileged white “ladies of leisure” but argues instead that crazy quilts more likely developed out of the creativity of black slave women who, from time to time, were permitted to keep the fabric scraps that otherwise would have been discarded after they finished making more conventionally designed quilts for their so-called owners (158).⁶ Now one might perhaps think that house making and quilt making ought not to be considered arts; that they are, if anything, crafts. But hooks is arguing deliberately for an expansive notion of the artistic. These two activities count for her, because they accommodate a link be-

tween aesthetic attention to everyday objects and popular empowerment. “The spirit of self-reliance and self-determination that was aroused and is aroused by quiltmaking, by this fusion of the practical with the artistic, stirs the imagination in ways that almost always lead to emotional awareness and emotional growth,” hooks (167) argues, and “that spirit of self-reliance often creates the social context that made survival possible.”

Although hooks does not address improvisation in any great detail in *Art on My Mind*, her discussions of salvage art, folk arts, and popular art practices do suggest fruitful links between popular empowerment and improvisation. Her actual mention of improvised art making appears only in her analysis of Basquiat’s graffiti-inspired paintings. One of the aspects of his project hooks (1995a, 42) wants to valorize is his celebration of the creativity and innovation of black jazz musicians: “the avant-garde dimensions of the music that affirm fusion, mixing, improvisation.”⁷ Beyond this fairly tangential observation, however, hooks offers some tantalizing hints as to how her aesthetic views incorporate or cohere with improvisatory attitudes toward art making. Her view of the artistic process, for instance, is that “even moments of premeditation are disrupted by the unexpected” (26). And her claim that “the very nature of artistic practice is rooted in a philosophy of risk” is, in my view, an improvisatory way of understanding art making (83). Further, when she says that “to truly champion artistic freedom we must be committed to creating and sustaining an aesthetic culture where diverse artistic practices, standpoints, identities, and locations are nurtured, find support, affirmation, and regard,” hooks, without explicitly recognizing it as such, is calling for an improvisatory culture (139).

I want to make clear here that I am not intending to essentialize African American identity through attribution of an “inherent” style of art making. Neither hooks’s identification of an African American aesthetic nor the improvisatory orientation I am drawing out of her view is dependent on the notion of a particular essence.⁸ Instead, both are best seen as a response to colonization. Improvisation historically has functioned as a resistance to power of the kind that hooks endorses, one that attends to contingency, empowers its participants, and responds to the community within which it is performed. It has the capacity to manifest an inclusive aesthetic vision consistent with the ethic of love and the political philosophy of liberation that hooks is ultimately committed to as postcolonization social goals. The call for diversity, inclusivity, and participation that we see in politically resistant improvised music supports a link between the aesthetic value judgments we make and those that are typically labeled “ethical” or “political”

and draws on postcolonial/anticolonial assertions of the prima facie value of every voice. hooks seems to be echoing the work of improvisation theorists—I have in mind here, in particular, Ingrid Monson’s *Saying Something* (1996)—when she tells us, “Art constitutes one of the rare locations where acts of transcendence can take place and have a wide-ranging transformative impact” (hooks 1995a, 8).

Inclusive Aesthetics and an Ethic of Love

For hooks (1995a, 138), the relation between an aesthetic that includes and transforms and a politics that liberates is necessary and inextricable. “In a democratic society,” she contends, “art should be the location where everyone can witness the joy, pleasure and power that emerges when there is freedom of expression.” “Art [is] the practice of freedom” and, in its capacity for representation, is “a means by which the self is constructed and made visible” (144, 163).

She sees representation as the function through which art is revealed as political, but, as I noted earlier in my discussion of her attention to the artistic status of crafts, she is deliberately defining the concept of art as broadly as possible. Representation as politics is not a limiting of artistic possibilities as in, for instance, Soviet realism; instead, it is a wide-ranging appreciation of the connections between objects and the communities in which they take on their meaning. So, for instance, her grandmother’s quilts were representational, not in the sense that they were what hooks (2000, 15) calls “story quilts,” but because her grandmother could and did pull them out to recount tales of family history, pointing to a piece of cotton in a quilt and recalling its first life as a dress hooks’s mother had once worn. This is social aesthetics in its attention to the way who we are and how we live influences the kind of art we make. And that is the point hooks (1995a, 57) insists on in her analysis of visual politics: “All colonized and subjugated people who, by way of resistance, create an oppositional subculture within the framework of domination recognize that the field of representation . . . is a site of ongoing struggle.” The problem of representation that hooks (1992, 1) identifies as particularly pressing for African American communities is the prevalence of images that reinscribe white supremacy and internalized racism, a problem that is particularly acute in mass media. “For black people,” notes hooks, “the pain of learning that we cannot control our images, how we see ourselves [and] how we are seen [by others] is so intense that it rends us. . . . Often it leaves us ravaged by repressed rage, feeling weary, dispirited, and

sometimes just plain old brokenhearted” (3–4). This, too, is social aesthetics, how the kind of art we live with influences who we are. And if hooks’s contention that African American communities do not care—or do not care enough—about visual art is correct, perhaps we have here a partial explanation: people on constant guard against racist imagery may be easily worn down by visual politics and can, as a result, be discouraged from producing (or sharing) images of their own. The confluence of racist representations in the media and an oppositional subculture can lead to a lively contestation—an image war, if you like—or it can lead to a passive withdrawal. The path hooks endorses is, of course, contestation. Art matters, for her, because it offers a sense of agency (hooks 2009, 132).

Liberation and healing can happen, though, only if image making is taken up as a central political project in which communities examine “both the kind of images we produce and the way we critically write and talk about images” (hooks 1992, 4). But, hooks (1995a, 32) cautions, “Willingness to critically engage art by black folks in all its profundity is still very difficult in a culture of domination where people do not learn to look beneath the surface.” The starting point she suggests for cultural liberation is the aesthetic education she received, an introduction to aesthetics that “is more than a philosophy or theory of art and beauty; it is a way of inhabiting space, a particular location, a way of looking and becoming” (hooks 2009, 122). By this, she means to underscore the enduring point she makes across many of her books about culture and community (see hooks 1992, 1995a, 2000, 2009): aesthetic appreciation ought to be understood as part of our daily lives, something we learn through experience of, and with, the people and places we love. A connection to art and beauty in our lives is a crucial human need, hooks says, and it is fulfilled in the same way that all other human needs are: in community with others. It is these particular locations and ways of looking that are rooted in the everyday she foregrounds in the critical discussions of particular artists that are interspersed among the theoretical essays of *Art on My Mind* (hooks 1995a). In Basquiat’s work, she celebrates what she sees as decolonizing impulses that mark African American art making, explaining that “a dual critique is occurring [in his work]. First, the critique of Western imperialism, and, then, the critique of the way in which imperialism makes itself heard, the way it is reproduced in culture and art. This image is ugly and grotesque. That is exactly how it should be. For what Basquiat unmask is the ugliness of those traditions. He takes the Eurocentric valuation of the great and beautiful and demands that we acknowledge the brutal reality it masks” (hooks 1995a, 38).

The analysis of Basquiat draws our attention to the ugliness of art and the art world, whereas much of hooks's "cultural" writing stresses the other side of the coin, the "aesthetics of the everyday" that I sketched in the previous section. The connection, as I see it, lies in her observation, quoted earlier in her recollection of discovering African art in Paris museums, that separating people from the artistic traditions of their communities is a tactic of colonization and marginalization (hooks 1995a, xv). Basquiat's attention to the ugly highlights the alienation that results from this tactic, and hooks's attention to relearning an appreciation for beauty and creativity through everyday engagement with the people and places one loves highlights the empowering solution of developing solidarity through aesthetics. There is also, she thinks, a decolonizing function in the work of Gonzalez-Torres that is similar to the one she identifies in Basquiat. Gonzalez-Torres speaks to her of the need to reject philosophical notions that perpetuate oppression—specifically, the distinction between a public sphere and a private one that feminist theory takes up as the condition of possibility for domestic abuse, between the collective and the individual⁹—so that we can "open ourselves to the possibility of communion and community" (53). Art criticism that attends to location—of the artist, of the audience—enables "a . . . critical culture where we can discuss the issue of blackness in ways that confront not only the legacy of subjugation but also radical traditions of resistance, as well as the newly invented self, the decolonized subject" (93).

Even "learning to see and appreciate the presence of beauty is an act of resistance in a culture of domination that recognizes the production of a pervasive feeling of lack, both material and spiritual, as a useful colonizing strategy," says hooks (1995a, 124). But charging that the progressive left has been too preoccupied with material needs and benchmarks, she also observes, "Without love, our efforts to liberate ourselves and our world community from oppression and exploitation are doomed" (hooks 1994, 243). While resistance to politically oppressive structures such as colonization is important, developing an appreciation for both beauty and love serves to remind us that we must attend to the spiritual aspect of human life and human communities. The art to which hooks wants to draw our attention is not just concerned with philosophical critiques of material deprivation. At its most potent, art draws us into a mind-set in which we come to respect and value all of our fellow human beings, through our experience of valuing those whose creative abilities move us.

She attributes the inspiration for her ethic of love to Martin Luther King Jr.—whose commitment to nonviolence, solidarity, and the notion of "be-

loved community” is drawn from his Christian belief in love for all human beings as fellow children of God—and cites his belief that we find the highest good through love, that it is love “that unlocks the door to the meaning of ultimate reality” (hooks 1994, 244). “It is in choosing love,” she argues, “and beginning with love as the ethical foundation for politics, that we are best positioned to transform society in ways that enhance the collective good [and in c]hoosing love we also choose to live in community. . . . The moment we choose to love, we begin to move against domination, against oppression,” she continues; “the moment we choose to love we begin to move towards freedom, to act in ways that liberate ourselves and others. That action is the testimony of love as the practice of freedom” (247–48, 250). hooks does not endorse the explicit commitment to Christianity that drives King’s theorizing of love and the ideal he speaks of as “the beloved community,” but she does share his robust view of what love is. In his Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech, King explains that his call for “an all-embracing . . . love” is not the “oft misunderstood and misinterpreted concept so readily dismissed by the Nietzsches of the world as a weak and cowardly force, . . . not . . . some sentimental and weak response which is little more than emotional bosh.” By way of explaining what he means by love, King quotes the British historian Arnold Toynbee: “Love is the ultimate force that makes for the saving choice of life and good against the damning choice of death and evil.” King asserts, and hooks agrees, that “love is the key to the solution of the problems of the world.”¹⁰

hooks (1995b, 263) does not take up King’s call for love and for a “beloved community” uncritically, however. In another move that we might want to see as reminiscent of improvisatory strategies, she takes up his concept and revises it to meet the needs of a different context. She notes that his vision of “a *beloved community* [is one in which] race would be transcended, forgotten, where no one would see skin color.” This, says hooks (263), is what makes King’s ideal “a flawed vision. The flaw, however, was not the imagining of a *beloved community*; it was the insistence that such a community could exist only if we erased and forgot racial difference.” A disregard of difference, expressed in King’s dream of a world in which his children would be judged by their character rather than their skin color,¹¹ makes much more sense in the context of a movement to integrate white and black America than it does today, in a more multicultural world where the fissures and divisions among communities are visible to all—not just those who are marginalized as a result of their “difference.” Today, the doctrine of racial colorblindness is the target of harsh criticism by hooks, who insists on both an

aesthetic and a politics in which the other is not homogenized. She charges, “The notion that differences of skin color, class background, and cultural heritage must be erased for justice and equality to prevail is a brand of popular false consciousness that helps keep racist thinking and action intact” (265).¹² In her view, “*Beloved community* is not formed by the eradication of difference but by its affirmation, by each of us claiming the identities and cultural legacies that shape who we are and how we live in the world” (265).

Even as hooks recognizes the color-blindness of King’s vision of community as flawed, however, she fails to identify the blind spot in her own thinking: her idealization of community. This, too, represents a point of convergence between her theorizing of the aesthetic and the political and the theorizing we find in improvisation studies. Indeed, one might go as far as to argue that the problem in both cases is a failure to theorize community at all; instead, it is just uncritically accepted as an affirmative and nurturing condition of possibility for social change.¹³ Untheorized belief that “community,” and our immersion in it, is a panacea fails to acknowledge the experiences some people have had—in musical ensembles, in religious congregations—of their membership in community as repressive of creativity and hostile to independent thought or self-expression. This need to critically theorize the possibilities and limitations of community is, I think, all the more pressing, all the more important for improvisation studies and relational aesthetics scholars to attend to, precisely because there are compelling responses available to counter this criticism.

We who think of community as a crucial factor in human flourishing do ourselves no favors by ignoring or dodging such criticisms. Instead, I think we should face this ambiguous capacity of community head-on, in much the same way that the western Canadian political philosopher Roger Epp does in *We Are All Treaty People: Prairie Essays* (2008). Epp’s project is to articulate a political philosophy that has at its heart the values and social experiences of rural farmers and residents of small-town farming communities. This, he argues, is a necessary opposition to mainstream political theory, which begins with, and from, urban centers. He writes about having grown up in small towns—the kinds of communities most often thought of as the paradigm of stultifying repression—and frankly acknowledges that the members of these communities can limit one’s opportunities for personal and economic growth and for self-expression through, for instance, prejudice and assumptions drawn from community gossip about one’s family. However, he also insists on the generative possibilities of the deeply personal knowledge small-town residents have of one another, a knowledge that strikes

those of us from urban environments as invasive and limiting. Epp wants us to take notice of the subtle and ongoing ways that intimate knowledge of one another can function as support and encouragement and ways that the judgments small-town residents make of one another can inspire commitments to personal and social transformation.¹⁴ In addition, this knowledge base gives us access to our own histories and insight into the range of interpretations that others may place on those histories. Communities, in other words, can grind us down, but they also ground us. We need not be naïve to see them as valuable.

In a similar vein, hooks (1995b, 264) insists, “We cannot surrender that longing [for *beloved community*]—if we do we will never see an end to racism.” Returning to the importance of the everyday, and emphasizing the individual engagement that is sometimes used to distinguish ethics from politics, she argues that we can see the plausibility and the potential of King’s “beloved community” in “the small circles of love we have managed to form in our individual lives” (264). Our own lives can “represent a concrete realistic reminder that *beloved community* is not a dream,” that it can be achieved through strategies of antiracist education and critical consciousness raising (264). “Our devout commitment to building diverse communities is central,” hooks tells us, “like all *beloved communities* we affirm our differences. It is this generous spirit of affirmation that gives us the courage to challenge one another, to work through misunderstandings, especially those that have to do with race and racism. In a *beloved community* solidarity and trust are grounded in profound commitment to a shared vision. Those of us who are always anti-racist long for a world in which everyone can form a *beloved community* where borders can be crossed and cultural hybridity celebrated” (272).

Reading (into/onto) the Marginalized Other

Having laid out the framework that situates hooks’s commitment to an aesthetics of the everyday and an ethics of love, I want now to return to the question of how she is represented by commentators on her work. This is a question that I think has a much wider relevance than simply how we see hooks; it is, I would argue, a valuable illustration of how otherness has been treated in mainstream attention to both aesthetics and politics. Distortions of hooks’s work, and therefore her identity, are interestingly similar to misrepresentations of Frantz Fanon’s theorizing of decolonization and John Coltrane’s “free jazz” experiments. What I want to interrogate in this sec-

tion is the extent to which these falsifications are a function of a systematic devaluing of political-philosophical and aesthetic contributions by people of color. How are they silenced or deflected? And what is it that their contributions threaten?

I spoke at the outset of this chapter of Wallis's observation that hooks usually is not recognized as a legitimate voice in the art world, despite her sustained attention to art making and the aesthetic contexts in which representations of dominant and marginalized cultural objects are situated, and notwithstanding her own declared sense of herself as an artist and art critic. Where hooks's contributions to aesthetic discourses have been ignored, her contributions to social and political philosophy have been quite blatantly misrepresented. In making these observations, I have in mind responses to hooks I have encountered in casual conversations with friends and in teaching her work in classrooms that are predominantly populated by privileged white students. hooks is perceived by some of her readers as angry, anti-male, anti-white, and inexplicably, unjustifiably aggressive in her demands for change. Lest one think that this is a defect unique to the circles in which I travel, hooks's own essays recount ways her work has been twisted by interlocutors. She discusses, for example, an interview that she gave to *Esquire* magazine on the topic of how attitudes toward sex supposedly distinguish the militant "old feminist" of the 1970s from the cooler, more overtly sexual "new feminist" of the 1990s (hooks 1994, 73–81).¹⁵ hooks contends that her views were blatantly misstated and edited to make her sound as if she was conforming to the stereotype of the oversexed black woman, even as the interviewer also shaded her comments about the feminist movement of the 1970s to reinforce the popular view of it as man-hating. "It has always served the interest of the patriarchal status quo for men to represent the feminist woman as antisex and antimale," she notes, and it has always been acceptable to appropriate the words of black women to add the appearance of racial inclusivity to mainstream discourse, even as the contributions of black women to racial and sexual equality movements are ignored (75, 78).

Regardless of whether her words are being ignored or being twisted, the common theme of these re-presentations of bell hooks is their failure to acknowledge the humanism that consistently permeates her work. She speaks and writes inclusively of African American culture in ways that affirm the value of both the middle-class aspirations of her parents and siblings and the working-class values of her grandparents, but—despite the charges of careless readers—she does not engage in bitterness, special pleading, or race baiting. She writes from a racial perspective she realizes she needs to defend

against racist devaluations and a gender perspective she defends against sexist devaluations, but neither defense is mounted at the expense of those who are not African American or not women. The obvious goal of her defenses is to assert the humanity of the marginalized group, its belonging in the “beloved community.” In this, her work and responses to it are eerily similar to Fanon’s position in discourses on decolonization and postcolonial reorganization. In the opening chapter of his major work, *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon (1963, 30–33, 42–43, 73–74) analyzes the violence he claims is inherent in colonial relations. This analysis reveals the ways in which the violence settler governments impose on native populations produces a circuit that channels that violence through native communities and internalizes it, such that members of these communities attack one another rather than those who rule the colonies. There is “no possible coming to terms,” Fanon (48) declares. “[Colonization] is violence in its natural state, and it will only yield when confronted with greater violence.” The point of this analysis is to argue for the liberation from enslavement and exploitation of all human beings and “to set afoot a new man” who will live in a new, decolonized world (255). This, too, is a strong and persistent humanism, but all too frequently the Fanon who appears in academic discussions of colonialism is a ruthless, simplistic advocate of bloody violence, despite the obvious connection of this analysis of violence to the larger context of his assertion of the moral value of all human beings.¹⁶ In both cases—hooks and Fanon—a positive program of human liberation is disregarded, and largely tangential or highly contextual comments are foregrounded, with the result that the very arguments these thinkers are putting forth are inverted. In this way, their critiques of status quo politics can be dismissed as radical and dangerous nonsense.

It may seem odd to include Coltrane in this group and to thereby suggest that African American musical practices are disregarded. But reflect for a moment on the popular misrepresentation of Coltrane’s “free jazz” musical experimentations and consider whether there is a similarity to the devaluing through distortion that is imposed on hooks and Fanon. Most notable, in this regard, is the critical attention given to his collaboration with Eric Dolphy in the early 1960s, described by *Down Beat*’s editor John Tynan as “a horrifying demonstration of what appears to be a growing anti-jazz trend” (quoted in DeMicheal 1998, 110). Of Tynan and the critics who subsequently jumped on the “anti-jazz” bandwagon, Coltrane remarked, “They made it appear that we didn’t even know the first thing about music—the first thing. And there we were really trying to push things off” (quoted in Kofsky 1970, 242).

Speaking of the contemporary art world, but making a point that I think applies to the entire history of African American arts and music in the twentieth century (and quite possibly to that of earlier eras), hooks (1995a, 58) observes, “Commodification of blackness creates a market context wherein conventional, even stereotypical, modes of representing blackness may receive the greatest reward [and] images that would subvert the status quo are harder to produce.”¹⁷ This is a perennial problem in the jazz world: conventional representations of black jazz musicians constrained and mystified the efforts of many who sought to expand and explore the boundaries of the genre, Coltrane among them. The limitations of standard set lengths and the commercialization of nightclubs focused on profits derived from their “two drink minimum” were such a straightjacket for Coltrane that his later years were characterized by a reluctance to perform in clubs and a search for alternative venues, such as community centers (Kofsky 1970, 418–20). Perhaps the most toxic stereotype facing jazz musicians, though, is the primitivization of genius that explains the artists’ talents as if they are intuitive conduits of a “spirit of music” rather than acknowledging them as skilled and, in many cases, highly trained creators.¹⁸

So what is achieved through these blatant acts of revisionism? One of the things that hooks, Fanon, and Coltrane have in common is their opposition to mainstream thought, and as hooks has noted, challenges to (including subversion of) the status quo are always at risk of being suppressed in favor of more orthodox views. “The fierce willingness to repudiate domination in a holistic manner is the starting point for progressive cultural revolution,” hooks (1994, 6) tells us. In a number of her essays, hooks makes a crucial distinction between revolution, a complete transformation of a system, and reform movements that make local adjustments that may ameliorate burdens that fall on some people but leave the overall framework of “the system” largely unchanged (see, e.g., hooks 1994, 73–81, 2008, 36–40). So my answer to the question of what their contributions threaten is, simply: the status quo. And what revisionism achieves in these cases is a discrediting of these voices, these claims to represent a point of view that society must take seriously if we are to progress. In discrediting voices such as hooks, Fanon, and Coltrane, the dominant culture can attempt to remain as it is.

Conclusion: What’s Art Got to Do with Decolonization?

Of course, the dominant culture’s dream that it can maintain itself unchanged is just that: a dream. Visions of how things might be are available

to revolutionaries, as well. hooks (1995a, 123) tells us that “rather than surrendering our passion for the beautiful . . . we need to envision ways those passions can be fulfilled that do not reinforce the structures of domination we seek to change.” We need to make of art “a place where boundaries can be transgressed, where visionary insights can be revealed within the context of the everyday, the familiar, the mundane” (138). Or, to put the point in language more consistent with the discourse of social aesthetics, we need to improvise a diverse and multicultural world—united by love (political solidarity), not an imposed, coercive homogenization—*through* an aesthetic of otherness. This is where the insights of social aesthetics can help us: drawing attention to the ways our art shapes us and the ways we shape our art requires us to consider closely who *we* are—the differences that distinguish us from each other *and* the common projects that can bring us together. It requires us to cross borders, to share ideas and strategies for change, and to build a world that has input from, and space for, us all. In hooks’s view, “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” (hooks 1994, 5; emphasis added). And “to live in anti-racist society we must collectively renew our commitment to a democratic vision of racial justice and equality. Pursuing that vision [means] we create a culture where *beloved community* [characterized by solidarity and meaningful coalition] flourishes and is sustained” (hooks 1995b, 271). For that, we most desperately need “an aesthetic sensibility that is redemptive,” that sustains us even as it transforms us (hooks 1995a, 121).

Notes

1. Wallis (1995) identifies hooks’s *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (1990) as the more theoretical “companion volume” to this examination of aesthetic representation and judgment. However, aesthetic concerns also mark hooks’s *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (1992) and *Outlaw Culture: Resisting Representations* (1994), as well as the much more recent *Belonging: A Culture of Place* (2009).

2. There is perhaps a partial explanation for this phenomenon that we can find in writing that hooks has done elsewhere. In an essay on psychological effects of racism titled “Healing Our Wounds: Liberatory Mental Health Care,” she implies that failure to empower communities at the grassroots level may be particularly pronounced in African American communities due to the influence of

“racial uplift” strategies such as W.E.B. Du Bois’s notion of “the talented tenth” (hooks 1995b, 133–45). “Passionately devoted to the political goal of racial uplift, [nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century black critical thinkers] highlighted the achievement of exceptional individuals [and] did not talk about the psychological casualties” (133). This suggests that the subjectivity of successful elites may historically have been celebrated to the exclusion of the majority of members of the communities that produced these “exceptional individuals.”

3. I am grateful to Eric Lewis for this point.

4. The coherence of this language with the discourse of relational aesthetics suggests hooks as a precursor to that discourse. However, it is important to see that hooks continues to use the language of traditional aesthetics—“elegance,” for instance—and does not distance herself from the aesthetic to take note of the social and political aspects of art, as some contend the more postmodern strands of relational aesthetics do.

5. Because the camera was there, of course, busy producing Matthew Brady’s iconic photographs of Civil War soldiers. It was simply—as a novel technology deployed by elite segments of the dominant class to provide solemn mementos of their history—unavailable to serve African American projects of family reunification.

6. Although hooks discusses quilt making as a solitary pursuit, focusing on her grandmother’s single-handed production of household necessities through which she developed her artistic talent, there is also current research that stresses the collective production by African American women of quilts. This is yet another link to improvisatory practices.

7. She notes that “he felt a strong sense of affinity with jazz artists in the shared will to push against the boundaries of conventional (white) artistic tastes” and his celebration of this affinity made it possible for him to imagine himself as part of a thriving black artistic community (hooks 1995a, 42).

8. Of the debate about essence and identity, hooks (1995a, 11) observes, “When the ground is shaking under one’s feet, fundamentalist identity politics can offer a sense of stability. The tragedy is that it deflects attention from those forms of struggle that might have a more constructive, transformative impact,” like decolonization.

9. The “public sphere-private sphere” distinction has been criticized as oppressive (or, at least, potentially oppressive) from a feminist perspective on the grounds that women and children are vulnerable to abuse by husbands and fathers in a system that conceives of families as “private” and under the exclusive, undisputed control of the male head of household. See, e.g., Engels 1972, MacKinnon 1983, Okin 1999. This view of the family as a private domain in which the man is the undisputed sovereign effectively removes the other members of the household from the types of protection that the state might claim to offer to citizens in the public sphere—for example, protection from coercion by a stronger or more powerful fellow citizen. The “sovereignty” accorded to men through deployment of this distinction is analogous to the status given to the leader of a

nation-state in the jurisprudential theory of John Austin's "command theory" of law (Austin 1996) and the political theory of Thomas Hobbes (2007) and Max Weber (1946). In all of these accounts, the leader stands in for and assumes the power to dictate the will of the collective, which supersedes the will of the individual, thereby producing the classical philosophical tension between the citizen/individual and society.

10. Martin Luther King Jr., "The Quest for Peace and Justice," Nobel lecture, University of Oslo, Norway, December 11, 1964, http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/peace/laureates/1964/king-lecture.html.

11. Martin Luther King Jr., "I Have a Dream," Lincoln Memorial, Washington, DC, August 28, 1963, www.afn.org/~dks/history/dream.

12. Her point here—that the claim of a human community that is "beyond color" or post-racial actually perpetuates the very phenomenon it presents itself as having transcended (for instance, by marking as deviant all those who are not similarly willing to drop allegiance to racial identity)—is remarkably similar to Pierre Bourdieu's rebuttal of Kantian aesthetics. Kant claims that "taste," the judgment of beautiful and sublime objects made in a position of "disinterested interest," is universal, a thesis Bourdieu rebuts through the presentation of empirical data on a variety of aesthetic judgments indexed to the class identities of the judges. Kant's assertion that taste is universal acts to delegitimize as judges those who do not make "the right" judgments and, as Bourdieu (1984) shows, cultural acceptance of a universal notion of taste results in a retreat from judgment by groups already socially marginalized.

13. I am grateful to Georgina Born for raising this point in response to my presentation of an earlier version of this chapter at the Improvisation and Social Aesthetics conference held at McGill University, March 2010.

14. The kind of intimate knowledge of a person that Epp (2008) has in mind is the small community's knowledge of one's family members that one may not have oneself: their memories of the musical ability shown by a never known uncle who died in a long-ago war or their awareness of the alcoholism that caused a grandparent's inexplicable behavior. The community's transmission to an individual of these observations can be inspiring or cautionary and can help one form conceptions of life's possibilities that would be much less available to one raised in the studied anonymity of more urban areas.

15. Bizarrely, this interviewer talked to her as someone who could describe anthropologically the "old feminist" movement (in which she participated) and simultaneously as someone who embodied the attitudes of the sexually free "new feminist."

16. For more detailed discussions of how Fanon's analysis of violence is misread, see Carastathis 2010, Gratton 2010, Nicholls 2010.

17. In an interview on hip hop, hooks discusses the phenomenon of gangsta rap as "upscale primitivism" marketed to white kids and notes that rap artists are simultaneously pushed by two contradictory forces: the demand that they present themselves as killers, pimps, "playahs," and conspicuous consumers of luxury

products (champagne, cars, jewelry) and the demand that they conform to popular notions of what it means to be a good role model: see bell hooks, “bell hooks on Video: Cultural Criticism and Transformation,” Racialicious blog, 2007, www.racialicious.com/2007/06/19/bell-hooks-on-hip-hop. hooks glosses this irresolvable tension as a demand we make of rap artists that they be more moral than any other artists. Note, in the context of her comment about the need to conform to conventional stereotypes in order to succeed, that similar analyses of the narrowing of hip hop—which began as radical grassroots resistance to the corporatization, gentrification, and destruction of public spaces of urban communities—to gangsta rap are offered in Byron Hurt, dir., *Hip Hop: Beyond Beats and Rhymes*, God Bless the Child Productions, 2006; Rose 1994.

18. This view of the jazz musician as unthinking conduit of music, primitive and therefore capable of channeling emotionally powerful music without being able to analyze musical genius (the role of the jazz critic, of course), is pervasive in jazz histories. See the histories traced by Kofsky (1970)—notably, the critic’s contempt and disrespect for the musicians—in the first chapters of this book; by Jones (1963), particularly in the chapters dealing with the emergence of the blues from the Deep South; by Heble (2000), especially in his analysis of Theodor Adorno’s cultural framework; and by Porter (2002).