

**bell hooks**

**KILLING RAGE**

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**ENDING RACISM**

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## TEACHING RESISTANCE

### THE RACIAL POLITICS OF MASS MEDIA

**W**hen I began the process of education for critical consciousness to radicalize my thinking and action, I relied on the writings and life practices of Malcolm X, Paulo Freire, Albert Memmi, Frantz Fanon, Amical Cabral, Walter Rodney, and a host of other thinkers. The work of these teachers and political mentors led me to think about the absence of a discourse on colonialism in the United States. When thinking about the kind of language commonly evoked to talk about black experience in white supremacist capitalist patriarchal North America, I was often struck by the pervasive use of euphemisms, words like “Jim Crow,” “Uncle Tom,” “Miss Ann,” etc. These colorful terms obscured the underlying structures of domination that kept white supremacy in place. By socializing white and black citizens in the United States to think of racism in personal terms, individuals could think of it as having more to do with inherent prejudicial feelings than with a consciously mapped-out strategy of domination that was systematically maintained. Even though African Americans in the United States had no coun-

try, whites took over and colonized; as a structure of domination that is defined as the conquest and ownership of a people by another, colonialism aptly describes the process by which blacks were and continue to be subordinated by white supremacy.

In the beginning black folks were most effectively colonized via a structure of ownership. Once slavery ended, white supremacy could be effectively maintained by the institutionalization of social apartheid and by creating a philosophy of racial inferiority that would be taught to everyone. This strategy of colonialism needed no country, for the space it sought to own and conquer was the minds of whites and blacks. As long as a harsh brutal system of racial apartheid was in place, separating blacks from whites by laws, coercive structures of punishment, and economic disenfranchisement, many black people seemed to intuitively understand that our ability to resist racist domination was nurtured by a refusal of the colonizing mindset. Segregation enabled black folks to maintain oppositional worldviews and standpoints to counter the effects of racism and to nurture resistance. The effectiveness of those survival strategies was made evident by both civil rights movements and the militant resistance that followed in their wake. This resistance to colonialism was so fierce, a new strategy was required to maintain and perpetuate white supremacy. Racial integration was that strategy. It was the setting for the emergence of neo-colonial white supremacy.

Placed in positions of authority in educational structures and on the job, white people could oversee and eradicate organized resistance. The new neo-colonial environment gave white folks even greater access and control over the African-American mind. Integrated educational structures were the locations where whites could best colonize the minds and imaginations of black folks. Television and mass media were

the other great neo-colonial weapons. Contemporary African Americans often ponder how it is possible for the spirit of resistance to be so diminished today even though the structures of our lives continue to be shaped and informed by the dictates of white supremacy. The spirit of resistance that remained strong from slavery to the militant sixties was displaced when whites made it seem as though they were truly ready to grant black folks social equality, that there were indeed enough resources to go around, that the imperialist wealth of this country could be equitably shared. These assumptions were easy to believe given the success of sixties black militant struggle. By the time the bubble burst, collectively black folks had let our guard down and a more insidious colonization of our minds began to take place. While the Eurocentric biases taught to blacks in the educational system were meant to socialize us to believe in our inherent inferiority, it was ultimately the longing to have access to material rewards granted whites (the luxury and comfort represented in advertising and television) that was the greatest seduction. Aping whites, assimilating their values (i.e., white supremacist attitudes and assumptions) was clearly the way to achieve material success. And white supremacist values were projected into our living rooms, into the most intimate spaces of our lives by mass media. Gone was any separate space apart from whites where organized militant resistance could emerge. Even though most black communities were and remain segregated, mass media bring white supremacy into our lives, constantly reminding us of our marginalized status.

With the television on, whites were and are always with us, their voices, values, and beliefs echoing in our brains. It is this constant presence of the colonizing mindset passively consumed that undermines our capacity to resist white supremacy by cultivating oppositional worldviews. Even though

most African Americans do not identify with the experiences of whites in real life or have intimate relationships with them, these boundaries are crossed when we sit facing the television. When television was first invented and many black folks could not afford TVs or did not have the luxury of time to consume representations of whiteness all day long, a barrier still existed between the value system of the dominant white culture and the values of most black folks. That barrier was torn down when televisions entered every living room. Movies function in a similar way. Not surprising, when black Americans were denied easy access to white movies, black cinema thrived. Once the images of whiteness were available to everyone there was no black movie-going audience starving for black images. The hunger to see black folks on the screen had been replaced by the desire to be close to the Hollywood image, to whiteness. No studies have been done that I know of which look at the role mass media have played since 1960 in perpetuating and maintaining the values of white supremacy. Constantly and passively consuming white supremacist values both in educational systems and via prolonged engagement with mass media, contemporary black folks, and everyone else in this society, are vulnerable to a process of overt colonization that goes easily undetected. Acts of blatant racism are rarely represented in mass-media images. Most television shows suggest via the liberal dialogues that occur between white characters, or racially integrated casts, that racism no longer serves as a barrier. Even though there are very few black judges in the United States, television courtroom dramas cast black characters in these roles in ways so disproportionate to the reality that it is almost ludicrous. Yet the message sent to the American public and folks all over the world watching American TV is that our legal system has triumphed over racial discrimination, that

not only is there social equality but that black folks are often the ones in power. I know of no studies that have examined the role television has played in teaching white viewers that racism no longer exists. Many white folks who never have intimate contact with black folks now feel that they know what we are like because television has brought us into their homes. Whites may well believe that our presence on the screen and in their intimate living spaces means that the racial apartheid that keeps neighborhoods and schools segregated is the false reflection and that what we see on television represents the real.

Currently black folks are often depicted on television in situations where they charge racist victimization and then the viewer is bombarded with evidence that shows this to be a trumped-up charge, that whites are indeed far more caring and able to be social equals than “misguided” blacks realize. The message that television sends then is that the problem of racism lies with black people—that it exists in our minds and imaginations. On a recent episode of *Law and Order* a white lawyer directs anger at a black woman and tells her, “If you want to see the cause of racism, look in the mirror.” Television does not hold white people responsible for white supremacy; it socializes them to believe that subjugation and subordination of black people by any means necessary is essential for the maintenance of law and order. Such thinking informed the vision of white folks who looked at the tape showing the brutal beating of Rodney King by a group of white men and saw a scenario where he was threatening white lives and they were merely keeping the peace.

Movies also offer us the vision of a world where white folks are liberal, eager to be social equals with blacks. The message of films like *Grand Canyon*, *Lethal Weapon*, *The Bodyguard*, and a host of other Hollywood films is that

whites and blacks live together in harmony. Contemporary Hollywood films that show strife between races situate the tension around criminal behavior where black characters may exist as good or bad guys in the traditional racist cowboy scenario but where most whites, particularly heroic ones, are presented as capable of transcending the limitations of race.

For the most part television and movies depict a world where blacks and whites coexist in harmony although the subtext is clear; this harmony is maintained because no one really moves from the location white supremacy allocates to them on the race-sex hierarchy. Denzel Washington and Julia Roberts may play opposite one another in *The Pelican Brief* but there will not be a romance. True love in television and movies is almost always an occurrence between those who share the same race. When love happens across boundaries as in *The Bodyguard*, *Zebrahead*, or *A Bronx Tale*, it is doomed for no apparent reason and/or has tragic consequences. White and black people learning lessons from mass media about racial bonding are taught that curiosity about those who are racially different can be expressed as long as boundaries are not actually crossed and no genuine intimacy emerges. Many television viewers of all races and ethnicities were enchanted by a series called *I'll Fly Away* which highlighted a liberal white family's struggle in the South and the perspective of the black woman who works as a servant in their home. Even though the series is often centered on the maid, her status is never changed or challenged. Indeed she is one of the “stars” of the show. It does not disturb most viewers that at this moment in history black women continue to be represented in movies and on television as the servants of whites. The fact that a black woman can be cast in a dramatically compelling leading role as a servant does not intervene on racist/sexist stereotypes, it reinscribes them.

Hollywood awarded its first Oscar to a black person in 1939 when Hattie McDaniel won as Best Supporting Actress in *Gone With the Wind*. She played the maid. Contemporary films like *Fried Green Tomatoes* and *Passion Fish*, which offer viewers progressive visions of white females, still image black women in the same way—as servants. Even though the black female “servant” in *Passion Fish* comes from a middle-class background, drug addiction has led to her drop in status. And the film suggests that working secluded as the caretaker of a sick white woman redeems the black woman. It was twenty-four years after McDaniel won her Oscar that the only black man to ever receive this award won Best Actor. Sidney Poitier won for his role in the 1960s film *Lilies of the Field*. In this film he is also symbolically a “mammy” figure, playing an itinerant worker who caretakes a group of white nuns. Mass media consistently depict black folks either as servants or in subordinate roles, a placement which still suggests that we exist to bolster and caretake the needs of whites. Two examples that come to mind are the role of the black female FBI agent in *The Silence of the Lambs*, whose sole purpose is to bolster the ego of the white female lead played by Jodie Foster. And certainly in all the *Lethal Weapon* movies Danny Glover’s character is there to be the buddy who because he is black and therefore subordinate can never eclipse the white male star. Black folks confront media that include us and subordinate our representation to that of whites, thereby reinscribing white supremacy.

While superficially appearing to present a portrait of racial social equality, mass media actually work to reinforce assumptions that black folks should always be cast in supporting roles in relation to white characters. That subordination is made to appear “natural” because most black characters are consistently portrayed as always a little less ethical and moral

than whites, not given to rational reasonable action. It is not surprising that it is those black characters represented as didactic figures upholding the status quo who are portrayed as possessing positive characteristics. They are rational, ethical, moral peacemakers who help maintain law and order.

Significantly, the neo-colonial messages about the nature of race that are brought to us by mass media do not just shape whites’ minds and imaginations. They socialize black and other non-white minds as well. Understanding the power of representations, black people have in both the past and present challenged how we are presented in mass media, especially if the images are perceived to be “negative,” but we have not sufficiently challenged representations of blackness that are not obviously negative even though they act to reinforce white supremacy. Concurrently, we do not challenge the representations of whites. We were not outside movie theaters protesting when the white male lead character in *Paris Trout* brutally slaughters a little black girl (even though I can think of no other image of a child being brutally slaughtered in a mainstream film) or when the lead character in *A Perfect World* played by Kevin Costner terrorizes a black family who gives him shelter. Even though he is a murderer and an escaped convict, his character is portrayed sympathetically whereas the black male father is brutally tortured presumably because he is an unloving, abusive parent. In *A Perfect World* both the adult white male lead and the little white boy who stops him from killing the black man are shown to be ethically and morally superior to black people.

Films that present cinematic narratives that seek to intervene in and challenge white supremacist assumption, whether they are made by black or white folks, tend to receive negative attention or none at all. John Sayles’s film *The Brother from Another Planet* successfully presented a black male

character in a lead role whose representation was oppositional. Rather than portraying a black male as a sidekick of a more powerful white male, or as a brute and sex fiend, he offered us the image of a gentle, healing, angelic black male spirit. John Waters's film *Hairspray* was able to reach a larger audience. In this movie, white people choose to be anti-racist, to critique white privilege. Jim Jarmusch's film *Mystery Train* is incredibly deconstructive of racist assumptions. When the movie begins we witness a young Japanese couple arriving at the bus station in Memphis who begin to speak Japanese with a black man who superficially appears to be indigent. Racist stereotypes and class assumptions are challenged at this moment and throughout the film. White privilege and lack of understanding of the politics of racial difference are exposed. Yet most viewers did not like this film and it did not receive much attention. Julie Dash's film *Daughters of the Dust* portrayed black folks in ways that were radically different from Hollywood conventions. Many white viewers and even some black viewers had difficulty relating to these images. Radical representations of race in television and movies demand that we be resisting viewers and break our attachment to conventional representations. These films, and others like them, demonstrate that film and mass media in general can challenge neo-colonial representations that reinscribe racist stereotypes and perpetuate white supremacy. If more attention were given these films, it would show that aware viewers long for mass media that act to challenge and change racist domination and white supremacy.

Until all Americans demand that mass media no longer serve as the biggest propaganda machine for white supremacy, the socialization of everyone to subliminally absorb white supremacist attitudes and values will continue. Even though many white Americans do not overtly express racist thinking,

it does not mean that their underlying belief structures have not been saturated with an ideology of difference that says white is always, in every way, superior to that which is black. Yet so far no complex public discourse exists that explains the difference between that racism which led whites to enjoy lynching and murdering black people and that wherein a white person may have a black friend or lover yet still believe black folks are intellectually and morally inferior to whites.

Mainstream media's endorsement of *The Bell Curve* by Richard J. Herrnstein and Charles Murray reflects the American public's willingness to support racist doctrine that represents black people as genetically inferior. Anti-racist white male thinker and activist Edward Herman reminds us of the danger of such acceptance in his essay "The New Racist Onslaught":

Built on black slavery, with segregation and poverty helping reinforce stereotypes after 1865, racism has deep and persistent roots in this country. Today, racist Bob Grant has a radio audience of 680,000 in New York City, and racist Rush Limbaugh has a supportive audience of millions (extending to Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas). Reagan with his repeated imagery of black welfare mothers exploiting the taxpayer, Bush with Willie Horton and the menace of "quotas," and a slew of code words bandied about by politicians, show that polarizing racist language and political strategies are acceptable and even integral parts of mainstream culture today.

When black psyches are daily bombarded by mass media representations that encourage us to see white people as more caring, intelligent, liberal, etc., it makes sense that many of us begin to internalize racist thinking.

Without an organized resistance movement that focuses on the role of mass media in the perpetuation and maintenance of white supremacy, nothing will change. Boycotts remain one of the most effective ways to call attention to this issue. Picketing outside theaters, turning off the television set, writing letters of protest are all low-risk small acts that can become major interventions. Mass media are neither neutral nor innocent when it comes to spreading the message of white supremacy. It is not far-fetched for us to assume that many more white Americans would be anti-racist if they were not socialized daily to embrace racist assumptions. Challenging mass media to divest of white supremacy should be the starting point of a renewed movement for racial justice.