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Issues in Contemporary Art

Professor Gelburd

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West & Hooks Reaction

My reaction to Cornel West and Bell Hooks is that they both articulated their thoughts on the application of Postmodernism's context with firm conviction and clarity as it applies to race. Both are skeptical in its use of depicting an artistic aesthetic and espouse a neutral role of observation that reveals the true extent of social hegemony in the dominant culture. Cornel West equates this social hegemony as being the descendant of Eurocentrism and its application in postmodern theoretical analysis as being colonization. He elaborates by pointing out that the scholastically approved doctrine of postmodern theory negates the perspectives and achievements of black scholars and artists in their entirety, skewing the social construct of "intellect" as pertaining to white males in society's purview, and hence serving as a latent social control mechanism that reinforces racism and opposes intellectual integrity. The sociologist Eduardo Bonilla-Silva describes the four frames of the functionalist perspective of society as being abstract liberalism, naturalization, biologization, and minimization. West's description of the prevailing doctrine of postmodern theory is indicative of the frames of abstract liberalism, naturalization, and minimization of race at work. I am reminded of Benjamin, who cites politics as the impetus of the property system, where codification of social mores grants the authority to actively suppress dissent against the dominant culture, in latent methodologies that do not constitute the social construct of "oppression." This included the visual arts, in which the

dominant paradigm was “l’ art pour l’ art,” meaning the art for the art; the very tenant of Modernism that Greenberg espoused. It is indicative of the sociological anomie perspective, where the means of attaining success in accordance with ascribed cultural tradition are few and cumbersome. With the inventions of photography and film, artistic expression had latent methodologies to actively counterattack the dominant culture that did not constitute “dissent,” but yet it was. West cites music, sermon, and athletics as the main forms of artistic expression that black culture uses as the means of opposition, where music is the most effective. He shows a duality at work, where the dominant culture defines music as a form of “entertainment,” but not “dissent.” While the dominant culture exploits black music for material gain, the music informs, inspires, and mobilizes the masses in opposition against it inadvertently. Power and momentum for social change is further acquired by inspiring white youth as well as black youth, and further still with international exposure as the dominant culture markets black music overseas.

Bell Hooks agrees fervently with Cornel West on this issue, but differs in two aspects. Hooks first mentions that the achievements of black scholars and artists are mentioned in the annals of Postmodernist theory, but among the few that are recognized, she takes it a step further by pointing out that these contributions were all made by black males; not a single black female was mentioned. Second, Hooks views the role of the black intellectual as being just as important in the latent mobilization of opposition against the dominant culture, not confined to the sidelines as West contends. She asserts that it is the methodology of how ideas are conveyed to the masses that determine their potential for social change, not being confined to literature or academics alone. She reveals the generalization behind West’s contention by using music as an example; rap music originated as an agent of commentary rooted in the historical experience of social,

economic, and political oppression of black people from all classes of society, and still is. In effect, Hooks is giving West a taste of his own medicine.