

**CHAPTER SIX**

**‘A TECHNOLOGY OF THE SACRED’: BELL HOOKS AND VISUAL  
POLITICS IN ART AND SNAPSHOTS**

You also took my spirituals and gone.  
You put me in Macbeth and Carmen Jones  
And all kinds of Swing Milkados  
And in everything but what's about me-  
But someday somebody'll  
Stand up and talk about me,  
And write about me-  
Black and beautiful-  
And sing about me,  
And put on plays about me!  
I reckon it'll be  
Me myself!  
Yes, it'll be me.  
—Langston Hughes, “Note on Commercial Theatre.”

The intellectual tradition examined in this thesis is premised to a large extent on the negotiation of African American writers with visualities. Visuality here takes into cognizance both the media as well as the act of ‘seeing’. With regard to African American history, the problematics of gender and the interface of these with modernity and visuality play a determining role that is at best theorized or supplemented with the written word by the earlier writers.

In this chapter, bell hooks’ concerns (and questioning of) with the engagement (and relative absence of the same from serious critical evaluation) of black artists with visual and popular culture are premised on the act of ‘being seen’ in accordance with a white aesthetic hallmark. She situates art as a medium for decolonization, logically analysing that across history, “global imperialist missions” (hooks, *Art* xv) robbed off a people’s art pieces, destroyed or appropriated. This is her cursory observation while visiting museums in Paris full of African art pieces. Much of first world modernity

thrives on such art and aesthetics. The whole picture of a refined, subtle world of modernity rests on such practices: the ability to create and engage in artistic endeavours. The imperial agents—it is seen by hooks—have forever been on the lookout for such museal objects and there are two sides to this practice. One, that these objects adorn white walls, “carefully handled, preserved, and displayed to this day in Western museums as precious art objects”; two, a population stripped bare of such art objects who are in continual search of a place “where they can be at home again and rebuild a habitable world” (Azoulay 1). hooks says that the projects of colonization and subjugation are completed if “one could make a people lose touch with their capacity to create, lose sight of their will and their power to make art” (xv). The passage from colonization to decolonization is hence associated with paucity to participation in art and aesthetics. It is also useful to cite Achille Mbembe in this context: “The liberation of part of humanity from the yoke of colonialism constitutes a key moment in the history of our modernity” (Mbembe, *Out 2*). This means that a modernity that one group with a colonized history strives towards is marked by its attempts at decolonization. In hooks’ visual politics, this constitutes African American participation in both creative practices as well as critical engagements with these practices.

The aims of the chapter are

- (i) to show how the desire for the Other is rooted in an ‘imperialist nostalgia’ and ‘getting a bit of the Other;’
- (ii) to examine why the few critical engagements with African American visual artists that exist are instances where women’s voices are absent and unacknowledged;
- (iii) to show how engagements with creativity in a counterhegemonic way is an essential component of a people’s attempts at decolonization; and
- (iv) to examine the vernacular engagements with visualities in photographs and dwellings as sites of resistance to being defined by the whites.

With particular reference to hooks’ *Outlaw Culture* as well as *Art On My Mind: Visual Politics*, the chapter focuses on popular culture, the subjects and sensibilities of black art in general, the place of the ‘visual’ (photographs) in the ordinary lives of African Americans as well as inter-racial relationships premised on ‘seeing’. In a way, the chapter returns to the focal points of the earlier chapters in that the visual and the politics

informing it are understood through hooks' critical engagement with visual culture and the place of black artists in it. These discussions also extend to everyday inter-racial interactions and in this, 'seeing' the Other through a racial lens figures predominantly.

Black modernity—here articulated through the visual culture—is a distinct terrain which astraddle the twin challenges of living up to a white aesthetic standard and maintaining its own individuality, rooted in the black experience. This thesis, has tried to trace a tradition of black visualities in picking up writers as visual artists in many instances before this. In taking up hooks though, it concentrates—through her critical material on black artists and vernacular exercises in visualities— also on artistic domains being governed and challenged by a racial standard, much like 'life' and 'living' in the earlier chapters. On being confronted with this, issues of representation, as evident earlier, find different expressions. In these new expressions, visuality is the primary mode of engagement, as evident in visual 'products' like photography, painting, sculpture etc. To reiterate, visuality, both as an artistic engagement by the selected writers, figured as companion pieces earlier. Here visuality is the central domain, and the black artist's engagement with visualities—along with challenges that accompany it— makes up a case for black modernity rooted in visual culture. This resorts to fashioning art pieces—painting, sculpture and the like—according to a unique black aesthetic standard.

### **Seeing, Desire and the Other**

In "Eating the Other: Desire and Resistance" hooks situates inter-racial desire as rooted in commodification of Otherness. The desire for the 'Other' entails more delight, intensity and satisfaction than the intra-racial encounters. Having overheard a group of young male students while she was teaching at Yale who wanted to "catch" girls from other racial groups for sex, hooks tries to understand and situate this desire for the Other. On sharing this with her students, she discovers that race and ethnicity were filters which determined how they "shopped" for sexual partners. hooks sees these sexual encounters with the Other as serving "the ends of white male desires" (hooks, "Eating" 368). This white male desire for the black body is contextualized with reference to "imperialist nostalgia". This she borrows from Renato Rosaldo's use of the term to define "nostalgia, often found under imperialism, where people mourn the passing of what they themselves have transformed". hooks adapts it to mass culture where such nostalgia picks up from

“reenacting and reritualizing in different ways the imperialist, colonizing journey as narrative fantasy of power and desire, of seduction by the Other” (369).

In hooks, the Other is seen as the repository of the “primitive,” whose lives have been interfered with by colonial modernity, but evokes a sense of “plenty, of bounty, a field of dreams” (369). The projection of these images into the Other tends to facilitate ‘transgression’. The Other is also presented as the territory to be explored and being vocal about such explorations endows the white male with a sense of break from a white racist past which would consider such adventures as “taboo, as secret, as shame” (368). In this urge to transgress is the intention to reconstruct the norm of masculinity as well as to affirm their cultural plurality. To break the pattern of familiarity (intra-racial sexual partners), to openly announce the desire for the Other is seen by them as progressive.

In the passage from the position of the colonizer/master who violated the bodies of colored women to the desire for the Other in order to be changed themselves by the process is nevertheless a perpetuation of racism. The venture into the Other has this underlying aim of exonerating a racist past: “Most importantly, it establishes a contemporary narrative where the suffering imposed by structures of domination on those designated Other is deflected by an emphasis on seduction and longing where the desire is not to make the Other in one’s image but to become the Other” (369). Desire then leads to exploitation, albeit of a different kind from the imperialist variant. This contact which looks revolutionary on the surface has problems associated with it which leads to reinscribing a racist status quo. This inter-racial exchange and sexual tensions and tendencies alike were, as we have already seen in this thesis, characteristic of most black-white sexual relationships. It ranges from the brief interaction between Bigger and Mary in Richard Wright’s *Native Son* to the more intimate relationship between Rufus and Leona in *Another Country*. hooks premises it on the ocular tendency of the white that needs an ‘other’ to exoticize and continue a lineage of fetishization. If western modernity aims to ‘transgress’ racial disparities, it is tendentious on the commodification of the ‘Other’ which emerges from a lasting imperialist legacy.

The need for an Other to fashion one’s own identity has its instances in the media culture too. There are instances when the image of the white is accentuated by black presence. hooks argues that representation is determined by market demands and tries to get behind the scenes to check facts as well as figures. Black people would instantly find

themselves in the visual advertising mode as soon as market figures show that more black people use a certain product. Representation, then, is determined by market demands. hooks cites the example of Pepsi, where market surveys confirmed a higher consumption of the drink by black people and “suddenly we see more Pepsi commercials with black people in them” (371).

In fact, hooks dissects the confluence of visual metaphors and text as is seen in a fall issue finds expression of *Tweeds*. The cover has the map of Egypt and a white man holding an Egyptian child in his arms. The background consists not an image of Egypt of the present day but silhouettes of the exotic ‘primitive’ Egypt with huts and palm trees. The issue covers seventy-five pages of white people in the ‘centre’, with darker skinned people in the background. It is clear that colored people are appropriated just to “enhance the blank landscape of whiteness” (372). The visual strategies include situating them in the background and blurring their images so that one’s attention is concentrated on whiteness rather than on Otherness. hooks uses the British slang “bit of the Other” to define this desire of ‘whiteness’ for the “primitive”. The white needs a bit of the black Other in asserting its modernity, as in one image of a woman wearing pants with a dark ‘sister’ of hers who wears a traditional skirt. The former is liberated in her position as a white woman who could travel the world, unlike the Other.

Media representation of blacks entails in hooks a study of cultural icons. Picking up specific cases, she questions public figures who at one point crossed barriers and were (and still are) elevated to a position that dodges any criticism. Later in their lives though, these figures conformed to a patriarchal, racist or sexist norm, as the case may be. Madonna is a case in point. She started off as this ‘hot’ Madonna who challenged the status quo but ends up being displayed as a little girl sex kitten in magazines of a grown woman over her 30s. Madonna recreates herself for the mass patriarchal pornographic gaze. This is at opposite ends with Madonna’s initial sexual radicalism and feminism. She conforms to the expectations of an ageist and sexist society in that she tries to retain her image as very young (“little girl”) woman who does not look her age.

It can be seen here that hooks’ images and participation in visual politics also frame gay experience, but in a stereotypically heterosexist and homophobic manner. Contrary to achieving the intended aim to represent homosexuality as an alternative, these images further their stereotypical representation as ‘freaks’ and sidekicks. In *Sex*,

for example, Madonna establishes herself as “the ideal feminine,” with two lesbian sex radicals which visually constructs them as freaks. The lesbian couple marginalized, and Madonna is at the centre: “the victim and voyeur” (hooks, *Outlaw* 15). Another image, where she looks anguished, at a distance from the two women, as though she does not belong there. Portrait of homoeroticism/ homosexuality reflects her own voyeuristic perspective. She looks at them and the reader/viewer looks at her looking. These images can be read as coming out of heterosexual imagination. It is neither a recognition, nor an acceptance of difference. It attributes the site of interrogation to a heterosexual center, without vesting any authority to the homosexual/ homoerotic presence. Like the white woman in pictures in Egypt, the backdrop (here the lesbian women) is an extension of heterosexual desire, not an alternative. It only accentuates heterosexuality, just like it highlighted a white woman in those blurred images of black women in the background.

### **African American Visualities and Black Female Artists**

Representation of alternative sexualities as well as black people in the hands of the white artist/ critic/ writer remains a pervasive issue that this thesis deals with. In hooks, the analysis takes the form of highlighting the dilemma that black artists face as a result of the dearth of critical voices thinking and writing about their art. She acknowledges the white male artists (Leon Golub and John Baldessari) whose works influenced her but she does not include them in these essays because “the uses of time, the choices we make with respect to what to think and write about, are part of visual politics” (hooks, *Art* n.p.).

*Art on My Mind*, to this end, strategically concerns itself with the work of black female artists, although the writer says that wasn't a planned move. However, obliteration of black voices, and more importantly, black women voices from both art and its critical engagements provide enough inspiration to curate a few essays that foreground the contribution of black female artists to African American visualities. hooks cites Cornel West's essay “The New Cultural Politics of Difference,” which is informed by the work of black female artists. In his essay, West dwells at length on the themes of invisibility and erasure of black voices in art and aesthetics, themes which the work of individual black female critics highlight so powerfully: “The decisive push of postmodern black intellectuals toward a new cultural politics of difference has been made by the powerful critiques and constructive explorations of black diaspora women”

(hooks, *Art* xiv). It is only surprising that a push and shift—in his mention of a ‘new’ cultural politics of difference—while apparently facilitated by black women artists, make no mention of these artists or their respective works. It, on the other hand, is clubbed under the fancy tag of a generalised event. The result is that while it acknowledges the absence of black women artists from art criticism, it makes little effort to include their names.

*Art on My Mind* challenges contemporary visual politics that privileges male art over female. Those aspects of black art which attract any sort of critical intervention are restricted to the curation and interpretation of works by black men. hooks’ intervention is in questioning how and where black women figure in visual politics. If they do figure, the way in which these artists and their art are depicted are issues hooks is interested in. Most often, as she suggests, these reduced to descriptive rather than critical analyses. Her design includes selection of art pieces by these women in the first place. In doing this, she is also making an entry into a white and male dominated field of art criticism, where black women’s voices either go hushed or unacknowledged.

Again, building upon Michele Wallace’s essay “‘Why Are There No Great Black Artists?’ The Problem of Visuality in African-American Culture,” bell hooks highlights the indispensability of engagement with visual art and artists because “regimens of visuality enforce racism” (xii). The argument she forwards is that the black artist is excluded from all visible spaces. She tries to link the politics of exclusion to white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy. She further argues that within the politics of exclusion, there is a further exclusion of black female artists. Any reservations to participating in visual arts thwarts attempts at revolutionizing matters of participation in visual experimentations. To this end, even when anthologies and critical material on art find representatives in black voices, those are mainly of black men. In terms of voices of women critics of art and visual practices, these are restricted to being borrowed, appropriated or used, but hardly acknowledged or even cited. This deters any future attempts by women writers to actively engage with critical interventions on visual practices.

hooks illustrates the exclusion of female voices in visual regime in Maurice Berger’s edited anthology *Modern Art and Society*. With an introduction by the editor which claims that the collection will offer new ways of thinking about visual arts, Berger



includes essays which exclude art by black women or even critical works on visual art by the same. The first essay by Cornel West, as mentioned previously, acknowledges the role of black female voices towards a new cultural politics of difference. However, no names are mentioned in this context, setting the black women intervention in visual regime rather hazily: “The work of black female critics informs this essay, yet our names go unmentioned” (xiv). If the issue addressed is new interventions in the visual medium, these works evade any mention of artists and art pieces—individual black female artists and their works—which make radical departure from the already achieved practices. It can be said that while new trends, a clear mark of modernity in the visual regime are acknowledged, most of these mentions in the critical writings fail to highlight the modernity in black visual politics. That is to say, black women’s participation in visualities constitutes an important element of black modernity which has not been given the kind of attention it deserves.

In foregrounding all these aspects, hooks clearly tries to situate the relationship of black people with art. It ranges from ignorance and indifference to considering art as apolitical or even homing on ideas of good and bad. She attributes the varying relationships of black people with art to their class locations too. Most black people, hooks suggests in her analysis, consider movies and television as the more relatable medium than visual practices like art. Inherent in it is the expectation of art to create an air of familiarity: “Coming to art in search of only exact renditions of reality, many black folks have left art dissatisfied” (hooks 4). hooks here has the popularity of black portraiture in mind when she tries to categorize the kind of art favoured by black people.

To create shifts in the conventional expectations regarding the function of art necessitates a revolution in the ways of seeing art. Like Morrison, hooks suggests the necessity of diverse programs of critical education so that black folks not only develop an engagement with the visual medium but also comprehend that freedom of imagination and decolonizing minds require the promotion and celebration of creative expression. She argues that such programmes would “stimulate collective awareness that the creation and public sharing of art is essential to any practice of freedom” (3). Black visual politics, as already stated, is a part of black modernity and hooks sees freedom of creative expression as a step towards it: “If black folks are collectively to affirm our subjectivity in resistance, as we struggle against forces of domination and move towards

the invention of the decolonized self, we must set our imaginations free” (3). Majority of the black interest in art is confined, as hooks analyses, to owning cheap reproductions of art pieces. This indicates an interest in the commodity as such and no visceral association with it. Some of these—like those of Michelangelo and da Vinci—have religious sentiments attached to it too. In this, hooks sees something that black households could identify with. What evades such engagement is an experience with the transformative power of art. The centrality of art to one’s creative and imaginative existence is prefaced to *Art on My Mind* through citing Nell Sonneman’s words which explain what ‘true’ art must strive to do: “Art is a habit of the intellect, developed with practice over time, that empowers the artist to make the work right and protects him...from deviating from what is good for the work...It solely aims to bring a new thing into existence in the truest manner possible” (n.p.). In the note of familiarity that religious sentiments evoke, concerns like bringing a new thing into existence or art functioning as an intellectual exercise are brushed aside. Art is confined to the limits of religion or familiarity in any sense. hooks concludes how “whiteness is subsumed by the spiritual expression in the work” (8). The “politics of seeing” here involves attributing it with religious significance rather than seeing it as a product of white artistic endeavours.

The politics of seeing is defined by hooks as “how we perceive the visual, how we write and talk about it” (2). In another of these manifold ways, ‘ways of seeing’ art by black people concern itself with questions of ‘good’ and ‘bad’. To hooks, the debate between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ informs and distorts the reception of black art. She does not attribute the disengagement of black people to underrepresentation. In fact, there has been a history of black art in segregated communities. This did little to foster a penchant for the aesthetics of the visual art or create a major intervention in visual politics. The reasons behind this indifference and unimportance are deeper than this.

More often than not, black art has been subjected to the filters of the ‘good’ and the ‘bad’, the ability and the inability to meet the standards of ‘familiarization’. In a sense, black folks in segregated communities upheld the art that represented reality as it is; any instances of defamiliarization were met with resistance. hooks substantiates her argument through a mention of the popularity in segregated communities of portraiture as the favoured type. The presence of such art rules out the notion of underrepresentation; the underwhelming intervention of black art in visual politics has to

do more with the ways of seeing art. In the intellectual tradition that this thesis has tried to trace, it can be seen since Du Bois' endeavours in the inclusion of the visual artistic pieces of black artists, the importance accorded to drawing on the culture legacy of the African American experience. These attempts go beyond the popular portraiture but were restricted to glorifying a black present and past (at least in Du Bois' case).

The debate between 'good' and 'bad' extends to what needs to be shown and what deserves to be seen. The politics of seeing here determines an artist's choice of material, as hooks illustrates with reference to the career trajectories of Lois Mailou Jones and Robert Bearden. These artists, while starting off their careers anchored in European standards of art, found their calling and eventual recognition by drawing on "black experience" and "memories of black life- the images, the culture" (5). hooks cites Bearden's work as springing largely from "underclass experience" which left the black audiences disturbed: "To many of my own people, I learn, my work was very disgusting and morbid—and portrayed a type of Negro that they were trying to get away from" (qtd. in hooks 5-6). The pressures of always portraying the 'best' of one race, as hooks sees it, represses black artistic expression. Nell Solleman's quote mentioned earlier which explains art as "a habit of the intellect" holds true for Bearden's own artistic engagements in his expression of black content through the exploration of different forms. This includes abstractions too, which were deemed to be non-synchronous with black subject art. In representing the best of the race, certain aspects of black life were being completely neglected. In Bearden's art, and the importance accorded to him and his art in critical writings after his death, there is an acknowledgement of everyday experiences which can be material for the black visual aesthetic. In other words, every aspect of black life can cater to the demands of building a distinctive black visuality.

### **Negotiating the Eurocentric Gaze**

The inventory of expectations associated with art, as seen already, stifles the artist's aesthetic expression as well as its experience as transformative force. A critical approach towards art and ways of seeing would necessitate decolonizing the mind off such set yardsticks—ranging from western standards of perfection to the vernacular demands of representation of the race at its best and most glorious. Decolonizing one's mind begins with the acknowledgement that one is colonized in one's mind and imagination. Invoking Charles White, who considers creative practices as the shield one embraces to

prevent stumbling into a “chasm of despair and pessimism” (hooks, *Art* 5), bell hooks premises the event of decolonization with setting one’s imagination free. In other words, art should be independent of preconceived yardsticks of the search for familiarity, of being boxed into the good and the bad and aid at rethinking about life in general. A relationship can be ascertained between hooks’ persistent expectation of art as a transformative force and White’s idea, which she quotes, as a premise of decolonization. In White’s analysis, “aesthetics nurture the spirit” (5) and can provide “ways of rethinking and healing psychic wounds inflicted by assault from the forces of imperialist, racist, and sexist domination” (5). A key idea of alternative art and aesthetics—and here, visualities—as opposed to a homogenous and mostly hegemonic specimen emerges here that can sustain the authenticity of racialized, colonized and gendered identities.

It is necessary to note that black artists like Basquiat have pointed to the excesses of colonialism even as they work within western artistic traditions. hooks devotes an essay titled “Altars of Sacrifice” in *Art on My Mind* to elaborate on this. The Eurocentric gaze confines his artistic achievements to the ability/inability to be placed alongside ‘visible’ figures like Warhol or in a “continuum of contemporary American art with a genealogy traced through white males” (hooks, *Art* 36). It is here that the distinction between style and content should be taken note of. Though Basquiat himself acknowledges the influence of white artists on him, the white influence is not the only influence in his art. It is only when all these influences are taken into cognizance that Basquiat’s paintings emerge as a model that bares colonialism and its excesses.

Basquiat’s art then is a challenge to a politics of seeing that believes that “merely looking” (36), at a piece of art can be understood as “seeing”. This entails deciphering the element of inclusivity, as hooks does, in tracing the “convergence, contact, and conflict of varied traditions” (36). She invokes Baldwin’s lament in *The Fire Next Time* that “there has been almost no language” that could convey the “horrors” of black life. The black experience is private and Basquiat, as hooks suggests, gives that private anguish expression in his paintings by influences that are varied and not restricted to a white and western aesthetic. She traces a line of connection between Basquiat’s paintings and Maasai art. The skeletal bodies of Basquiat resemble Maasai art depicted in Gillies Turle’s book *The Art of the Maasai* (1992). In their art pieces, the Maasai use animal bones instead of pigments. This becomes a statement of their relationship with nature as well as their ancestors. In the place of written and recorded history, these art pieces—

more precisely, bones—are meant to “speak” and convey all necessary “cultural information” (40). This art form hence serves as the memory of an authentic black culture uninterrupted by white influence.

Basquiat, as hooks tries to see, borrows from the Maasai art too. His engagement in “the politics of dehumanization” (37) emanates from the colonization of both the body and mind. Hence, decolonization in Basquiat’s paintings homes in laying bare “the anguish of abandonment, estrangement, dismemberment, and death” (38). The visual here hinges on the skeletal (a Maasai influence as hooks sees), on a diminishing and vanishing (black) body. Contrary to the representation of the exotic fleshy black body, Basquiat renders the skeletal figures to “delineate the violent erasure of a people, their culture and traditions” (29).

In paintings that can be termed as highlighting ‘ugliness’, Basquiat lays bare both the horrors of colonialism and the black participation (and “complicity”) in such horrors. While hooks cites works like “Irony of a Negro Policeman” (1981) and “Quality Meats for the Public” (1982), her selection of images informs the overall tone of her analysis of Basquiat: baring and critiquing colonialism and imperialism and not sparing black participation in being commodified and serving the interests of their white masters. The repercussions are grave: “Expressing a firsthand knowledge of the way assimilation and objectification lead to isolation, Basquiat’s male black figures stand alone and apart; they are not whole people” (28). Half-formed, incomplete and skeletal—Basquiat’s male figures are visual representations (and dangers) of assimilation that entails self-objectification to the point that it is no way less than suffering racist assaults.

hooks’ readings (viewings) of Basquiat’s paintings are a retort against the ideologically distorted lens that centers on the Eurocentric gaze. The tendency to establish Basquiat on the same line as great white male artists predetermines the categories to be ticked according to western standards. While Basquiat himself premises his paintings on these standards, his artistic oeuvre goes beyond this. In fact, he demands to be read, viewed and felt in a line of tradition that builds upon an African heritage and tries desperately to decolonize the visual from an overwhelming western presence by critiquing both the perpetrators of colonialism and its colonized accomplices. His ugly and grotesque images point to the ugliness of the traditions associated with colonialism. These veer away from the glorification of the great and the beautiful and “demands that

we acknowledge the brutal reality it masks” (38). The perspective that premises itself upon glorification has nothing new to offer than the usual bromides about the influence of white artists on Basquiat and his trajectory to fame “courting the right crowd, making connections, networking his way into the high, “white” art places” (40-41). This position ignores the paradoxical relationship of Basquiat’s art with colonialism.

As hooks notices, the crown is a recurring image in his work. The meanings invested into it by art historians range from considering it within the realm of Basquiat’s fascination with “royalty, heroism, and the streets” to “a sense of double identity, a royal selfhood somehow lost but dimly remembered” (qtd. in hooks 30). hooks deciphers in these images more than just fame and glory. She emphasises that this desire is linked to dehumanization, irrespective of colonization, imperialism or even artistic validation. Imperialism is linked to patriarchy in the association of male ego with “the myth of heroism” (30); the racialized struggle for cultural hegemony becomes the struggle between black men and white men. Masculinity and its implicit desire to colonize is overwhelming, irrespective of racial status: “black masculinity is irrevocably linked to white masculinity by virtue of a shared obsession with conquest, both sexual and political” (31). His father figures were the revered jazz musicians. In this reverence is not an attempt to emulate their musical genius but to establish an affinity with jazz which thrived on “fusion, mixing, improvisation” (32). This affinity thrives on the shared notion of going beyond white artistic conventions.

In his relentless thrust for fame—for anything otherwise would render the black artist invisible—hooks sees Basquiat assume the position of the ‘colonizer/ explorer’. His forays into whiteness are premised on what she names the essay after, ‘altars of sacrifice’. In Basquiat, the sacrifice includes walking a tightrope, fitting into the standards of white imagination. This entails sacrificing portions of the self (and his art) which has no place in the white world, to emphasize the blackness that the white definitions acknowledge, and repudiate those that are strange to whiteness so that the ones where the whiteness can establish some familiar ground with its counterpart: “blackness that is not unlike whiteness” (33). The sacrifice of Basquiat in visual participation hinges on the paradoxical position of being black but assimilated, exotic but critiquing such self-distortion in the process. Representation here shows up a struggle that precludes sacrificial acts in the artistic process.

In giving Basquiat these readings, hooks takes up the role of a critical voice that analyses black visuality away from and in response to ‘white’ readings of the same art. It is also important to note here that Basquiat’s art pieces, when exposed to hooks’ way(s) of seeing it, unearth new meanings, not restricted to a Eurocentric understanding. These readings, while unique, are also responses to how black visualities have been exposed to biased perspectives which mainly draw from a western aesthetic. These newer understandings range from the inevitability of assimilation to the dangers of it, as well as a statement of a unique black aesthetic which demands to be ‘seen’ in ways not restricted to just ‘looking’ at black art. Basquiat’s works, in hooks’ analysis, do not solely emerge from efforts directed at catering to a white viewer. Influences go back to black art forms unmediated by white intervention as well as jazz music which relies on the scope of improvisation. In exposing these ways of seeing, hooks participates in art criticism, a largely white male dominated terrain. This can be read as an important context of black modernity. In opening up the work of black art to new readings and ways of seeing, women’s (vis-à-vis hooks’) participation becomes a denominator of black visuality that transcends from practice of art to art criticism.

### **Charges of Appropriation: Female Voices and Visual Politics**

In practices pertaining to both curating or even writing about art, progressive men tend to highlight the racial politics that inform the visual medium. An emphasis on this should not ideally subsume the works of women artists. However, visual trends bear testimony to just the opposite. hooks’s selection in the essays in *Art on My Mind* of women artists is an intervention into the sexism that pervades practices in the visual medium. It is clear that claiming black subjectivity in the visual entails claiming subjectivity by the subjugated.

As seen earlier, Basquiat’s paintings that thrive on a phallogocentric view of the universe in its repeated utterances of conquest and heroism alike. hooks points out the absence of female figures in his paintings. Though the overall tone of “Altars of Sacrifice” is to locate the struggles of black artists in a white art world, hooks rarely evades the question of women. In the conversational piece titled “Talking Art with Allison Saar” therefore, hooks tries to understand the interface of a woman artist with issues of representation and appropriation. Allison’s art has been accused of drawing upon realities that she has not experienced. Her conversation with hooks and hooks’ own

commentary on it focus on the centrality of imagination in such works as well as its role in making one more “emphatic” and knowing reality removed from us.

It may be useful to recall how earlier in *Art On My Mind*, hooks brings in the words ‘appropriation’, ‘authenticity’, ‘experience’ and ‘identity’ in one paragraph. The idea earlier in the book is to highlight the lens through which art pieces with black subject matter are seen in visual politics. As seen within this context, the artist here is Alison Saar who becomes a victim of narrow identity politics in that her background rather than her art is the focus of criticism. hooks’ commentary critiques the baseless nature of the criticism hurled at Saar—all of it centred on Saar’s training in traditional academic study of art and engagement with folk art ‘in spite of’ that.

Consequently, her art, informed as it is by “the aesthetic principles and ideals of that gentle art” is subsumed under charges of appropriation or a desperation by an already established artist “in search of an African American identity” (hooks, *Art* 13). Even if experience as a claim to authenticity is valued, the critic in hooks sees the need to revise such ontology and theories of knowledge. Artists like Saar have been at the receiving end of questions on identity and authenticity. The revealing pattern is of authenticity being centre staged when the African American artists’ work is received favourably amongst white critics and audiences alike. This is remarkably true when material regarding black experiences have garnered attention and request from the white mainstream.

A point that may help look at the problem more critically relates to Saar’s own creative process. These issues are reiterated (along with Saar’s own creative process) in the said conversational piece. When hooks refers to the (unwarranted) mainstream overemphasis on drawing upon realities that Saar has not experienced for her art, Saar establishes her creative process as a practice to “engage the ordinary, call out the beauty in the everyday, and celebrate the metaphysical” (21). Interestingly, Saar attributes her understanding of memories she has not directly experienced to “visions”. For example, there is the case of a piece she did about South Africa. The ‘vision’ came to her after she read about the life of a boy there in the paper. Art historians, trained through intellectual and academic eyes, create categories in art, separating indigenous artists from the academically trained ones. It is within such fastidious arguments about categories of art and artists where artists like Saar do not fit in, for their art is about vision and fusion



alike. Whereas cultural criticism thrives on concepts like ‘hybridity’, ‘border crossings’, in discussions of works by artists like Saar, this is restricted to her mixed ground when she uses the term “floating between two worlds”. The issues, as hooks sees it, of a woman artist crossing borders with respect to her imagination, with respect to worlds that are not ‘givens’, as in racial backgrounds, are completely ignored. Saar herself confirms here that her floating refers to “the two worlds of reality and magic”. In short, that refers to a characteristic of her artistic vision.

However, the critics’ perpetual engagement with her racial background is not dismissed by the artist herself. On the other hand, she acknowledges how meanings of words as well as art change over time. Nevertheless, a white mainstream tends to attribute a linearity or rationality to every experience, whereas some experiences, like Saar’s, hinges on the mystical. Also, it’s only the mainstream critics’ decision to term a certain art piece or style ‘fancy’ at some point of time in history. Saar’s engagement with the “ethnic” historically precedes any validation she may have received from white/western art historians and critics who gave her a label such as ‘fancy’. and termed ‘fancy’. Despite this, her work as an African American artist from a privileged background is termed ‘appropriation’ in view of the ground that she “appropriates the folk or black underclass and poor experience in an opportunistic manner” (27). This is similar to art being considered ‘hip’ only when it finds its way to a gallery endorsed by the white mainstream, regardless of the fact that such art practitioners and subject matter were very much there even before this entry into a white-validated world.

hooks deciphers in such trends a change of historical contexts as well as cultural consumerism. Invoking Frida Kahlo, hooks recalls how she was always fascinated by Kahlo as a little girl. Yet, a culture of consumerism, a culture that thrives on ‘eating the other’ has made Kahlo a household name in circles which seemed ignorant of any such mentions until say Madonna says that she finds her interesting. Under this consumerist culture, there is so much “vulgarization of work and process” that one is forced to give up a fascination and admiration one had for someone, like hooks’ for Frida. Following this, one does not acknowledge or remain committed to the earlier admiration since the art/artist has become the fascination of a consumerist culture. hooks sees in Saar’s trajectory a similar arc: an African American artist who aimed at reclaiming subjugated knowledge and hence is an example of hooks’ emphasis on decolonisation related to

claiming one's creativity. At this phase, the regional or financial background of the artist is hardly questioned. However, when such participation in the visual arts receives the validation of the white establishment, the question of identity becomes crucial. It is here that one needs to ask if it is legitimate for an artist from a privileged background to 'use' the experiences of folk or working-class culture.

In a consumerist culture furthered by magazines like *Artforum*, Saar sees artists being divided into two camps: the "crazy" and the "totally out there" (25) ones. It is possible that due to this division, critical studies have not given enough attention to academically trained artists who are drawn to folk art and give it expression in their works. It is necessary to note that any group that is marginalized or subjugated for long requires that their modernity—such as the one defined by and around visual politics—is studied in all its complexity and multi-layered possibility. In fact, when issues of class positionality receive sustained attention, alternative modernities get little or no attention. In such cases, border crossings, in terms of one's artistic output are side-lined. hooks sees in Saar's 'border crossing' a ritual that is as playful as it is sacred.

Saar associates her border-crossing skills—the fusion of the playful and the serious in her art—with "how the slaves survived all that pain: through creating, by making music, dance, poetry" (31). These fusions are captured in great detail in her work, something the critics entirely miss as universal experiences, such as female desire and longing. That fascination with passion as an element that contributes to self-destruction is so evident in pieces like *Fear and Passion, Love Potion #9*; yet so entirely missed by most critical analyses. For hooks, Saar's works invite us to the "realm of mystery" (34), made available through the politics of female desire and passion, which, however universal, have been evaded for long in any discussion of black art. In both Basquiat and Saar then, the echoes of fusion are resoundingly familiar to an African American lineage of art. Whether it is music or poetry, and here, visual aesthetics, this lineage thrives on the remnants of a poetics of remembrance as well as innovations.

### **The Terrains of Black Photography**

In his *Out of the Dark*, Mbembe links 'decolonization' with an "active will to community" (2). This, as he explains, is another name for the "will to life" (3); its goal being "to realize a shared project: to stand up on one's own and create a heritage" (3).

The dissertation, in the earlier chapters has dealt at length on the unique ways in which the visual experiments were carried out by various writers with the inclusion of photography. bell hooks is the voice of the critic here: she, in picking up individual black visual artists, provides both a critical intervention to black photography as well as establishes the distinct passages that black visualities tread in terms of themes, subject matter as well as styles.

Her analyses of the above visual experiments range from critical analyses and interviews of experts in the field as well as a nostalgic vein that goes back to walls of southern homes. The specific artists analysed are Felix Gonzalez-Torres and Carrie Mae Weems. In the former, the insistence is on a black voice in photography that does not limit beauty to the art object but in particular moments “of experience, of human interaction, the passion of remembrance that serves as a catalyst urging on the will to create” (hooks, *Art* 49). In hooks’ analysis of Gonzalez Torres as dealing with objects which are ordinary and familiar is the photographer’s interest in “exposure and revelation” (50). The “will to create” mentioned above, anchored in the ordinariness of life, is a manifestation of Mbembe’s “will to life”: to create a heritage. The concerned photographer, for example, creates a heritage, inviting the viewer’s participation in his selection of the mundane as well as events that have impacted many. In fact, ‘presence’ and ‘participation’ are the keywords that inform his pieces that make use of “datelines” (50). His art is termed ‘counterhegemonic’ in that it is not an invitation to escape into the realm of artistic imagination but to participate and interrogate one’s own individual subjectivity.

*Art on My Mind*, which is a search for art that ‘transforms’ find worthy exemplification in Gonzalez-Torres. In the ‘dateline’ pieces, for instance, specific instances which invite the viewer to “identify ourselves as subjects in history through our interaction with the work” (50). Far from an overwhelming concern of endowing these with some artistic beauty which is nonetheless present in such photographs, the ambition is to relate to a single event in different ways. Even in other images like that of an empty bed, hooks spoint out the many ways in which it could be ‘read’.

For an audience familiar with the artist’s autobiographical details, the image testifies to “the loss of his lover, the impact of AIDS, the power and pleasure of homosexual/homoerotic love and loss, the anguish of grief” (50). For the unfamiliar, it

triggers memories of personal loss and grief. The writer-critic sees in such images the collapse of the private and the public, the “convergence of the individual and the collective”, “particular losses” are linked to “collective grief” (51). In images such as of birds in flight against a backdrop of dark clouds again, the movement is beyond history, to a space of mystery; there is nothing to remember too. hooks brings in the metaphor of the “passport” to this movement. The image connotes the idea of a passport that does not rely on information otherwise necessary for any travel. The fixities of boundaries are overthrown, and the overlying emphasis is on the power of human connection and interaction, transcending the “realm of the senses” (52).

In each of these—whether ‘datelines’, empty spaces, or grey clouds and birds in flight—the unifying expectation is of the viewer to interact one’s personal experiences or memory to a collective whole. This marks the origin of a sense of community, combining experiences and elements of domestic life, everyday experiences, and bringing it into the realm of the art. The realm of art here is not restricted to art objects and the artist only but is opened up, inviting participation by the viewer too. The visual here ‘engages’ rather than instructs or enthrals. In this sense, Mbembe’s “invention of new images of thought” (Mbembe 3), is best seen as an element of decolonization. In effect, one finds that black modernity is circulated through Gonzalez-Torres’ innovative engagements with photography. In other words, the specifics of Gonzalez-Torres’ photography and the peculiar generic relationship of black arts and artists to the masses seeks to establish not just a new generic mix but also an interpretative community. If this praxis already lays the foundation for experimenting with black modernities—not necessarily away from white/western forms and galleries—the visualities and “new images of thought” codify the process.

### **Lorna Simpson: Black Women, Modernity, and the Will to Imagine**

The “new images of thought” becomes particularly important in photography with respect to the portrayal of black women. hooks uses Lorna Simpson’s work to illustrate this new strand of thought brought into visual practice. Significantly, this is done not just by reimagining the black female body and presenting it in a new way but also presenting her work as an intervention on art practices in general. In works like *The Waterbearer*, for example, the image of the black woman is not the conventional frontal image, with her race and gender and specific parts of the body in focus in a mode of objectification.

As hooks puts it, “Backs are turned, the bodies are sideways, specific body parts are highlighted—repositioned from the start in a manner that disrupts conventional ways of seeing and understanding black womanhood” (hooks, *Art* 98). She endows grace and elegance to black female bodies, in contrast to the usual depiction as “hard, lowdown, mean, nasty, bitchified” (98).

It would be important to see the effect of the sacred and mystery brought to Simpson’s subjects. In an example that hooks cites, *You’re Fine*, the image is of a black woman who is surrounded by medical terminology and labels that dehumanize her and even “reduce her to disembodied parts as though she were subhuman” (99). However, hooks sees in the image of the woman grace and dignity, her manner “an aura of serenity and repose” (99), in spite of the apparatuses of dehumanization surrounding her. Away from hard realities that focus on overt indications of race and gender, Simpson’s works focus on what hooks calls the “emotional realities, landscapes of the heart— a technology of the sacred” (98). In a way this technology of the sacred that both foreground and deflate the power of technology is a key to black modernity.

Susan Sontag associates photography with sexual voyeurism, in that it “at least tacitly, often explicitly” (9) encourages status quo, “encouraging whatever is going on to keep on happening” (9). This is particularly dangerous if issues of representation (here, female bodies) are involved. Simpson intervenes in the traditional, white representation of the black female body in vulgarized terms by imbuing them with a sense of mystery. Interestingly, hooks refers to them as “black Madonnas”: “In union with the earth, in touch with ancient properties, they embody the sacred” (hooks, *Art* 99). To this end, hooks’ “technology of the sacred” illustrated by Simpson in her photographic ventures which rejoins “body, mind, and spirit” (100). It is clear that her photographs disrupt the colonized—both westernized and objectified— representations of black female bodies by artists cutting across races who rely on stereotypes and fixed identities and denies them subtlety and complexity.

The “will to imagine” (hooks, *Art* 97) characterizes Simpson’s works, and encompasses artistic imagination as a liberatory work. This is significant given that black women were refused authority and voice. In colonized representations of black female subjects—presented mostly as mummies and whores—women are erased. Simpson’s counterhegemonic presentation has women subjects “resist and revolt,” “intervene and

transform,” “rescue and recover” (97). Simpson’s work, and in a broader respect, counterhegemonic art aims at decolonization of the mind and gravitates towards providing voices to subjugated bodies and letting them speak. Once again, the use and abuse of the black female body is centre-staged to formalize a grammar for black modernity as seen in the work of photographers and artists.

### **Walls that Speak**

hooks’ major interest in the centrality of photography in black lives seeks validity in theory and praxis. For example, she explores the subject at length in “In Our Glory: Photography and Black Life”. The attempt to integrate art to life in the black intellectual tradition has interesting bearings in what we have seen in and of visualities and visual art and politics. hooks’ discussion of black visual participation in black lives is rooted in personal attempts by black people of southern households away from white validated and white sponsored displays as in arcades, galleries, and billboards.

While *Art on My Mind* starts with hooks’ concern regarding the underwhelming participation or interest of blacks in the visual aesthetic, “In Our Glory” provides a quite different picture of black folks in relation to the visual. The anecdote that starts the essay moves between hooks’ father’s photograph and how she and her sisters react differently to it, and the concept of ‘image making’ that photography entails. The former has to do with personal memories and fondness for a particular picture at a particular phase of life. Her father’s photograph is aptly titled by hooks, “in his glory”: an image of her father she and her sisters never saw again, “confident, seductive, cool”, “before our presence in his life forced him to leave behind the carefree masculine identity this pose conveys” (hooks, *Art* 54). The latter, the one associated with ‘image making’ is what snapshots aid in. Growing up, hooks remembers herself as a child in the realm of “imposed images” from “voices of authority” (56) and hence unworthy of love.

The realm of the visual in the photograph, as she suggests, is more real to her, where she could be herself. In a particular image of her “glory” that she remembers and misses (now that she has lost that photograph), she is in a cowboy attire, gun and boots. The photograph, in her words, is an image of all she wanted to be in her imagination, a young girl capable of expressing joy. Photography encompasses the realms of visibility and invisibility, and Avery Gordon’s term—“a kind of visible invisibility”—can be used

here. That is, the viewer has a glimpse of the visible, the obvious thing captured by the camera's eye. What it also facilitates is to bring to the surface the limitations of visibility. The camera reveals the "blind spots of the mind", which are "the cultural, not simply physical, bars to seeing that photography exposes" (Smith 6). In each of these instances here, aided by the personal memory of the writer/viewer, is at first, woman's recalling of a father's image as she never knew— in his glory. In addition, it carries a memory of herself she preserves and appreciates (but someone she is not) as someone capable of expressing joy and not confined to determined images by voices of authority. In each of the above cases, their positions as a young black man and a little black girl growing up in the South have impacted the gradual change that they underwent. These images of 'glory' are viewed as such by the viewer (here, hooks) in spite of the camera not overtly stating these, but by the viewer's own cultural context, something another viewer might entirely miss.

In "Talking Art as the Spirit Moves Us," hooks cites art historian and critic Sylvia Ardyn Boone's use of the popular proverb "There is a thing passing in the sky; some thick clouds surround it; the uninitiated see nothing" (hooks, *Art* 101). Boone, for example, reiterates this several times in her book *Radiance in the Waters* with reference to Mende art; hooks applies it to the way African American art is looked at or studied. The 'initiation' here, as Boone explains, is a condition of 'seeing', and the eyes of the initiates are metaphysical: "an informed intellect, a widened vision, a deepened discernment" (qtd. in hooks 101). In other words, the initiates overcome the 'blind spots' engendered by cultural bars, and this is precisely the change to be intended for reinventing ways of seeing in black people. Only when black art is analysed by the metaphysical eyes explained here will it claim the authority and respect as an aesthetic practice that does not require the validation of white or even to follow western aesthetic standards.

### **A Poetics of Disruption**

It has been mentioned earlier that the camera democratized visual participation and experiences of the people. While it was assumed that desegregation would infuse a humanizing element into the American culture, it so happened that black representation was reduced to stereotypical portrayal, concerned with 'good' and 'bad' images. This was accentuated by black commodification; there lacked a "perceived market", hence "a

relinquishment of collective black interest in the production of images” (58). Contrary to it, in segregated south, black people participated in a visual politics of counterhegemonic art. While issues of validation, mass appeal have affected a participation in a counterhegemonic and oppositional standpoint as well as ‘seeing’ differently from the one already prescribed, southern homes provided a very different ‘picture’ in every sense of the term:

When we concentrate on photography, then, we make it possible to see the walls of photographs in black homes as a critical intervention, a disruption of white control over black images. (59)

‘Disruption’ is a repetitive word that occurs in *Art on My Mind*. The intention is to highlight artists who venture into a white dominated visual politics and leave their mark, while maintaining their originality. Away from such professional interventions into the field, the segregated South bears testimony to the role of the photograph in determining the process of ‘image making’ that the African Americans endorsed for themselves. On the one hand, these are silent and informal disruptions. These acts can be seen as a disruption of the misrepresentation and underrepresentation of African Americans in photography. The term used by hooks for this is “visual resistance” (57). This is actually a refusal to be typecast under the veneer of American or national representation. Representation again, she terms as a “site of ongoing struggle” (57), given the fact that the population being talked about is a colonized and subjugated one.

The fact is that the black southerners are working to create a counterhegemonic art, or as hooks says, an oppositional subculture within the visual politics of white domination. In terms of the black liberation movements, hooks sees “equal access” as the intended aim and the overwhelming emphasis on equality that desegregation would bring about. However, the making of images simmered under this broader struggle. A dismal picture after segregation was put up when representation—say, in terms of images—continued largely controlled and determined by western certification. To put it more precisely, representation ‘remains’ a site of ongoing struggle. In the segregated south, the sites of struggle/ contestation were not ‘out there’, in galleries and museum. Instead, one sees them ‘inside’, on the walls of the homes which proudly displayed black lives in all authenticity. Walls thus are seen as sites of resistance, a countering of black



representation made by whites that were one, degrading and two, the products of a racist white imagination.

The link between photography and racism is not new. Shawn Michelle Smith takes cognizance of photography as a racist practice in its early years:

Over the course of the nineteenth century, the literal whiteness of material objects blurred into cultural whiteness of subjects, as photography played a central role in establishing race as a cultural identity that could be seen in new ways. As scientists made race observable in bodies of colour, using photography to encode and inscribe race in physiognomy and physiology, commercial studio photographers made the whiteness of their primary subjects simply pass unnoticed as “normal” and “natural”. (Smith 16)

There is enough evidence to show how the white racist eye focused on specific parts of the body to characterize Africans as an abhorrent race. What is important here is that the normalizing of whiteness to a hyperbolic extent meant that blackness could not be associated with anything normal, mundane, emerging from day-to-day life. It almost always emerges from a racial denomination. She sees race as “one of the cultural inscriptions most defined by a dynamic of revelation and obfuscation, of hypervisibility and invisibility” (14).

Seeing one race overtly represented, as also represented in specific ways, entails that the rest are obscured from visibility. Photography—that is, camera as a technology—seems to have facilitated the representation of a white supremacist ideology. Smith brings in Richard Dyer, who, in *White* (1997), demonstrates how “photographic technologies were developed to secure idealized representations of whiteness; film and lighting were gauged and adapted to register the white face” (15). In “Talking Art with Carrie Mae Weems,” hooks extends the conversation to educating critics and audiences alike about images. She speaks of the “zone system” to highlight the idealisation of whiteness through technology:

Well, the zone system is completely constructed around what makes white people look best. It is our system and our theory-photo theory- for understanding what a good print is, and it is based on white skin. So the very base of photography and

the way that photography has been developed in the West as a science, because that's what most of it is, is based on ideas of whiteness. (hooks, *Art* 92)

Weems goes on to question the alternative fascinations of photography in terms of both subject and the photographing eye had it been developed in a place outside of the West, like in Japan. The dynamics of visibility and invisibility, impossibility and acceptability would, as Weems suggests, be very different. Smith explains this fascination of the camera for white objects in early days by attributing it to basic science like "White things reflect light more readily than dark things, and therefore they require shorter exposure times, a matter of some import to photography's early practitioners" (15). The mutation of this literal whiteness to cultural whiteness, as Smith calls it, engages the dynamics of normativity and invisibility. Southern homes (walls, precisely) become an intervention into this white normativity.

This phenomenon gives special importance and attention to black subjects who are rendered invisible in the apparent normativity of photography's selection of white subjects. In these homes, representation aligns seamlessly with documentation. In the present, when we are live in an age that is technologically advanced, the camera seems to be just another instrument at our disposal. For the black southerners, it acted as the medium to contest 'normalized' disprove images of blacks in the dominant culture. hooks lists these within parenthesis as extending to "salt shakers, cookie jars, pancake boxes" (hooks *Art* 59). In fact, as members of a culture whose history was repeatedly denied and erased, black artists and people found in the camera a way "to contain memories, to overcome loss, to keep history" (60). To a disempowered population of blacks in white culture, the camera worked as a medium that engaged visualities in several dispositions: "packed, stored, moved from place to place... shared, passed on...could be hidden, to be discovered at another time (60). The result: a counterhegemonic image production was aided by the photograph in both deliberate and unwitting ways, so much so that a holy trifacta ensued, "image making, resistance struggle, and pleasure" (60).

The walls, as hooks looks back, are a source of empowerment and site of contestation. Black people telling their own stories and spaces which bear testimony to the will to make and display images are both instances and sites of black modernity that

embraces technology for the purpose of self-fashioning. To the black artist as well as to hooks, walls operate as agents of decolonization.

### **Snapshots and Pictorial Genealogies: De-Scribing the Black ‘Other’**

Walls, to hooks, become agents of decolonization. From being represented in distortions and gross appropriations in cartoons and caricatures, the walls lay claim to a visuality that is African American in nature. African American mode of image-making in ‘snapshots’ that could trace genealogies, are supposed to be a counter to professional photographs taken by whites of blacks. In such photographs, colour was lightened and lighting adjusted in a manner that met white beauty standards. In fact, images were produced by blacks themselves which internalized this racism.

These snapshots were a rebellion against “those photographic practices that reinscribed colonial ways of looking and capturing the images of the black “other”” (62). These images were characterized by spontaneity far removed from the white supremacist practice of subjecting professional photographs with black subjects to rigorous processing and post-processing to satiate the racial eye. Snapshots, in retrospect, provide the viewers with a new and democratic perspective to look at African Americans. The attempt to minimise the intervention of the processing studios and labs, however, are not to be seen as universal radicalizations of walls in black household.

While pictures and picture-taking were seen as fun, for southern homes their cultural loads and radical potentials could not be ignored. People who lacked education, could not read, had their walls as a record of their history. hooks’ grandmother, Sarah Oldham is cited as an example; those pictures on her walls are referred to as “pictorial genealogies”: “They provided a necessary narrative, a way for us to enter history without words” (63). Mediating between the living and the dead, helping the present generations remember and record, these walls remain signal testimony of a community’s engagement with visualities in a counterhegemonic way. Also interesting is the way these photographs are arranged, arrangements being a keyway to understand these pictorial narratives. Sarah Oldham’s arrangements are attributed to her expertise in quilt-making: “she positioned the photos with the same care that she laid out her quilts” (63). Unlike photo-albums of family which required permission to be viewed, walls were an open

display. Walls, as hooks comes to say, are ‘announcements’ to comprehend the centrality of the visual in black southerners’ lives.

### **Artistic Vision and Space**

hooks extends the study of the artistic vision of southerners to the domain of architecture. In what is a key statement on the relationship between life and art, hooks attributes her writing/artistic career to “that legacy of the black sensibility about the visual and the aesthetic” (hooks, *Art* 155). This she says in relation to the assumption that class positionality determines one’s aesthetic vision and artistic sensibility and hence poor people are essentially devoid of it. Quite contrary to it, as she argues, lack of material privileges does not entail a lack of taste and creativity. She reinvokes her grandmother, this time in terms of the spaces she lived in and which continued to inspire awe in hooks. It (and its subsequent arrangements) met the ‘needs’ of herself, her husband and her extended family: “At Baba’s house there was always an excitement about space—a sense of possibility. Their dwellings were seen as in a constant state of change” (148).

Black people living in ‘shacks’ in the south or in the outskirts inhabited spaces which were small in dimension. This however did not restrict a free play of creativity in a way that was liberating. The porch was an essential element of the living space; the yard was a “continuation of living space” (149). When shifted to the north these people were confined to houses designed and owned by the state, all clamped in uniformity and allowing no room to engage creatively. The contrast to the lived in spaces of and in the south needs to be highlighted here:

The state-built dwellings erase all chances for unique perspectives to shape living space and replace these with a blueprint of sameness- everyone’s place structured similarly. Clearly these structures inform the ways poor folk are allowed to see themselves in relationship to space. (150)

It is necessary to note that in enforcing a uniformity in dwellings, carried out through these state sponsored projects, the authorities invest both directly and indirectly in “dehumanization of the spatial imagination of folks who are not materially privileged” (150).

It is clear that this kind of space allocation limits the sense of freedom and creativity among the poor. Having said that, in the shacks of the south—in the interior as well as the exterior, say, the yard—one could articulate one’s artistic sensibilities. For example, the arrangement of flowers, the placement of a swing and the porch are based on decisions informed by individual taste and larger meanings. The porch, for instance, as hooks recalls, was the place where her grandfather and father shared “thoughts, ideas, dreams” (149). In spite of the restriction of space, the porch would function as an agent of freedom that one, did not confine and, two, allowed its inhabitants to think and ‘breathe’.

hooks relates class positionality and the importance of open spaces to the spatial politics of the shacks: “Often, exploited or oppressed groups of people who are compelled by economic circumstance to share small living quarters with others view the world right outside their housing structure as liminal space where they can stretch the limits of desire and the imagination” (149). Once they migrate to the north, these same folks would find it difficult to let their imaginations articulate in spaces (homes) which were standardized and clipped any attempt at innovations.

This intervention is as much to do with space and architecture as with black epistemology. The relationship of poor and working-class people with lived spaces—that is, recognition or denial of space allocation—is directly linked to the community’s aesthetic engagement with space. The housing projects carried with it the belief that the poor and the powerless are “unable to intervene in, or transform, in any way, one’s relationship to space” (150). In the south, the shack remains a befitting site of contestation to “neocolonial” (151) narrative that denies these classes imagination or innovation owing to their economic conditions.

hooks’ use of the term ‘neocolonial’ is related to an understanding that such narratives refuse to acknowledge the architectural interventions by all economic classes and “violently erases and destroys those subjugated knowledges that can only erupt, disrupt, and serve as acts of resistance if they are visible, remembered” (151). hooks shares a personal anecdote of how she designed her first house in school and received praises for it but no one suggested that she could be an architect. She owes this to her class positionality: “I don’t even think architecture as a word in my cultural consciousness” (155). This is paradoxical in the sense that she was always intrigued by

shacks. Her grandfather's place, for instance, sparked enough curiosity. He was illiterate yet designed it in a way so that it could reveal his sensibility and "the essence of his soul" (155).

Watching a movie *Naked Spaces: Living is Round*, she connects (establishing a continuum) her visual experience of what is shown in the screen of diasporic dwellings to what she had seen growing up. In short, architecture was forever reinvented by taking recourse to traditional African styles of dwellings. However, much like the snapshots of southern households, these cultural practices too became subjugated knowledge. Thinking about architecture as a cultural rather than a professional practice would contest thinking of it in ways that are beyond reach by black folks. This facilitates thinking about architecture in a broad way, in the sense that architecture is not beyond the reach of people who are not architects. In fact, this a practice that is informed by culture, and much before it assumed the stronghold of a professional engagement, people still constructed and lived in dwellings that were dependent on the geographies that they inhabited, the resource—economic and otherwise—at disposal as well as their specific artistic vision.

## **Conclusion**

The chapter considers the act of 'seeing' and its interfaces with desire, gender and race. In the context of the thesis, attention is shifted to representations of modernity in the realm of the visual. bell hooks' critical engagement with African American visualities range from taking cognizance of the popular and the pop, photographs and snapshots to architecture as a cultural practice. In each of these, what is highlighted is the choice of artists who disrupt the white aesthetic standards in their respective fields. The important point is the acknowledgement of vernacular practices away from the professional ones but worthy claims to a counterhegemonic art. The insistence on creativity as an essential attribute towards decolonization of the mind is the tone of these pieces. What emerges are alternative models of visualities that switch seamlessly between the professional and vernacular aesthetics of an art practice.