A newly blossomed, flower-of-a-girl gathers clothes off the ground, smiling to herself as she reflects on the passionate hour she’s just spent with a young man from her creative writing class; one whom she found attractive and intelligent enough to approach and nonchalantly invite to her dorm room after they’d been dismissed by their professor. This girl likes to have sex; she enjoys the pleasures of intimacy, of exploring her body, of sharing the pride she takes in her body with others in a way that feels healthy and safe. After picking up the last of the young man’s clothes, she gently wakes him and politely asks him to leave. She has writing to do.

My imagined scenario of this girl both amazes and terrifies me. I revere her, but cannot understand her brazenness. This girl, Gloria Jean Watkins, will soon rename herself, going on to become the writer and activist bell hooks. Her confidence—in herself, her sexuality, her intelligence, her womanhood—is not just a source of self-discovery and curiosity, but a confrontational demand for change as well.

In her collection of essays Outlaw Culture, hooks tackles the systems by which Western societies cubbyhole and quantify identity. In her essay “Power to the Pussy: We Don’t Wanna be Dicks in Drag,” hooks examines American and European gender and race prejudices through the icon (both pop-cultural and religious) of Madonna. As a young creative longing “to lead a Bohemian life of intensity” in Europe, hooks sought to escape her experiences of prejudice in the United States (9). hooks, however, experienced racism in Europe just as intensely, albeit in a different form, through the European “passion for the ‘primitive’, the ‘exotic’” (10). Exemplary of this attitude was the insistence that Europeans “had no trouble worshipping a black Madonna” (10). hooks ventures to Montserrat to see this black Madonna for herself, and in her presence feels that “race, class, gender, and nationality had fallen away” to offer “[i]n their place . . . a vision of hope and
possibility” (10). Yet, hooks makes clear that this momentary transcendence can “in no way [alter] the politics of domination outside, in that space of the real” (10). To hooks, it is only in this “realm of the sacred imaginary” that race, class, gender, and nationality do not govern meaning (10). I can imagine how difficult it must have been for hooks to drag her eyes away from such a rare image of black female sacredness and purity as she ventured back out into the real world, a world that by and large views black women as anything but “pure” (22).

hooks defines her own experiences with race and gender as a black woman through personal accounts of her sexual past. In her essay “Talking Sex,” hooks boldly shares with her readers that, with her friends, she would have:

all-girl parties, grown up sleepovers. We slept together. We had sex. We did it with boys and girls. We did it across race, class, nationality. . . . We watched each other doing it. We did it with the men in our lives differently. We let them celebrate with us the discovery of female sexual agency. We embraced nakedness. We reclaimed the female body as a site of power and possibility. (85)

Sexual liberation is a reoccurring theme in hooks’ work, not only in her personal accounts but also in her critical analysis of contemporary society. Returning to the subject of Madonna (the entertainer), hooks draws the fine line between sexual revolutionary and “ho” (“Seduction” 65). According to hooks, Madonna was at one time a prominent feminist icon who represented “unrepressed female creativity and power—sexy, seductive, serious, and strong,” and exhibited “sexual assertiveness” in her earlier music videos (“Power” 11, 13). Madonna eventually sold out, and began following what hooks refers to as the “status quo” of American culture, transforming herself to fit the image of a “little-girl-sex-kitten” by dying her hair blond and doing risqué photo spreads for Vanity Fair (13, 12). The choices, which hooks attributes as essential to Madonna’s mega-success, reveal the pop icon’s “longing to leave behind the experiences of her ethnic and bodily history to inhabit the cultural space of the white feminine ideal” (21). According to hooks “[s]ignificantly, only ‘white’-skinned females could be imagined as innocent, virtuous, [and] transcendent,” while still exhibiting their sexuality
For black women, however, hooks argues that attaining power and status through one’s sexuality is impossible.

The line between empowering and exploitative—between sexual revolutionary and “ho”—is a thin one, and often cultural icons like Madonna falsely equate sensationalism with radicalism. By doing something provocative, I must be making a statement, right? It must be profound. hooks delves more into this phenomenon in her essay “Gangsta Culture,” where she explains that “some of the more misogynist stuff in black music was there to stir up controversy, to appeal to audiences” (138). hooks cites the album cover for Snoop Dogg’s record *Doggystyle*, which depicts a “naked black female head in the dog house, her naked butt sticking out” (138). This image was published in a 1993 edition of *Time* magazine accompanying a music review by Chris Farley titled “Gangsta Rap, Doggystyle.” hooks points out that Farley “makes no mention of sexism and misogyny, or any reference to the cover” (138). hooks questions whether *Time* would have so readily reproduced that image had a naked white female body been inside the doghouse waiting to be “fucked from behind” instead (138).

In her essay “Seduction and Betrayal,” hooks critiques *The Bodyguard* and *The Crying Game*, films depicting black women as sexual tropes. hooks refers to Jaye Davidson’s character—a trans black woman—in *The Crying Game* and Whitney Houston’s—a black singer who falls in love with her white bodyguard—in *The Bodyguard* as characters whose only “lure is in the realm of the sexual” (65). These characters, hooks goes on to add, are depicted as “sexually available, apparently indiscriminate, . . . incapable of commitment, . . . likely to seduce and betray” (65). Later on in *The Crying Game*, Davidson’s character assumes a maternal position in her white boyfriend’s life, and shifts from the role of “ho” to the only other sexual identity black women apparently possess: “mammy,” a black woman who is asexual, catering only to the needs of the white people around her. These films rely on the same tropes we’ve always seen of black women; they just so happen to depict “taboo” interracial couples and sexual identities outside the heteronormative paradigm. hooks is unimpressed with this feigned radicalism, and in her usual sarcastic way, tersely claims: “nothing radical about that” (“Power” 15). hooks explains that even when we leave the realm of cinema, black women—whether “mammy” or “ho”—are ultimately represented as individuals without sexual agency.
The same can’t be said for white women. hooks quotes the film academic Richard Dyer, who writes “being white is coterminous with the endless plenitude of human diversity” (Dyer qtd. in “Power” 22). To hooks, Madonna exemplifies the white woman’s ability to make radical transformations within her sexual persona. Madonna can afford to wake up one morning and decide to be “the young Italian white girl wanting to be black,” emulating the “exotic other” (“Power” 23, Warrell). Or, she can assume the role of the familiar “ultimate cultural icon of white female beauty, purity, and sensuality” (“Power” 23). Purity and sensuality. The assumption that this flexibility and freedom to claim or reject, slice or dice, one’s sexuality is available to all women is what makes mainstream feminism so frustrating to hooks. In her essay “Katie Roiphe,” the author describes how the work of creating inclusion and solidarity within feminism “risks being undone and undermined by some of the current feminist writing by young white privileged women” (119). Laura Warrell explains this frustration in a more contemporary context quite well in her essay “Why Can’t Black Women Claim Sluttiness, Again?” Warrell expresses her slight resentment for women like Ophira Eisenberg, Jillian Lauren, and Chelsea Handler, authors of the autobiographical books *Screw Everyone: Sleeping My Way To Monogamy*, *Some Girls: My Life in a Harem*, and *My Horizontal Life: A Collection of One Night Stands*, respectively. These books are about the past sexual escapades of former “sluts”; all white women profiting off of their experiences as free sexual spirits, who managed to successfully keep their reputations of “purity,” or at least normality, intact. Warrell explains that “sexual adventure can be . . . a markedly different experience for Black women and even more politically loaded than the power tussle dominating the dialogue currently.” Warrell cites an interview Eisenberg gave for the *New York Post*, where Eisenberg claimed to have enjoyed her sexual adventures because of her ability, through her sexuality, “to take [men] down. Refuse them so they could be put in their place” (Eisenberg qtd. in Warrell). Warrell asserts that this rationale, however valid, doesn’t seem to include the experiences of many women of color, who “are often considered by white and other non-Black men as an exotic other, fetishized as wanton.” Diminished to a fetish object, the black woman “can usually only trigger a purely sexual response . . . the dating game is not a titillating power struggle for the fetishized object who has no power to take
back.” Mainstream feminism continues to undermine the experiences of women of color and the black woman continues to be marginalized within the feminist movement.

While I understand Warrell and hooks’s frustration with this broken feminism, I struggle with the earlier rather dangerous agenda that hooks seems to push in her earlier work. I didn’t quite get what made the sexual escapades hooks describes in “Talking Sex” any different from the “hos” she describes in “Seduction” or the “new” Madonna she critiques in “Power” (65, 13). After all, according to her definition of what makes a female “creative and powerful,” exhibiting and taking control of one’s sexuality is a good thing (“Power” 9). hooks is not very specific about what makes one woman a “ho” as opposed to a “revolutionary” (“Talking” 85). It is only when I return to hooks’s own experiences of sexual exploration—particularly, in light of Warrell’s article—that I begin to understand hooks’s politicization of female sexuality.

The way in which hooks went about having sex with people was arguably a political act. In resisting the conventions of male and female sexuality, she felt that she was reclaiming her sexual autonomy. I think hooks feels that this defiance of convention and stereotype is the key to the sexual liberation of white women and women of color alike. For women to liberate themselves from the bounds of the “status quo,” the white woman’s rejection of her sexuality as “pure” and bordering on childlike is just as essential as the black woman’s rejection of her role as a “ho” or a “mammy.” And we’re left to assume that hooks intentionally sought out sexual partners she knew would respect her for who she was, as a woman of color, and not a caricature of black womanhood. hooks’s demand for respect defies not only sexism, but racism as well. In the same way I’d originally overlooked the key word, assertive, in hooks’s description of a formerly “sexually assertive” Madonna, I’d completely ignored the way in which she engaged with sex in her own life (“Power” 10). The bow really, really matters.

Such pointed and confrontational analyses embody hooks’s demand for the acknowledgement of black women’s humanity. In order for a black woman to even begin to claim her sexuality, she must first be humanized. While hooks shows us through her own sexual experiences that sexual liberation is possible for a black woman, she makes it very clear that no sexual
agency can be reclaimed so easily if black women are not afforded the same spectrum of sexual identity and expression as white women are.

An undertone in hooks’s work is a coming to terms with the notion that most sex comes with political responsibility. Through her critical analyses of contemporary society, hooks seeks for all women to understand the power dynamics that our culture has fused to sex, lest we fall victim to a trap of exploitation and a reinforcement of stereotypes thinly disguised as progressive. If we do not see through this veil, hooks warns, we become Madonnas fooled into thinking we’re Ellen Willises, and Whitney Houstons thinking we’re Audre Lorde.

But most important, perhaps, to hooks’s work is a striving towards an inclusive feminism, a want to liberate all women from a society that restricts the freedom of sexual identity and empowerment. This map of hooks’s mind fills me with the same sense of “promise and possibility,” the same “vision of freedom” that the image of a black Madonna evoked in her (10). When reading hooks’s work, the confident college girl I imagine her to have been is brought to life, the demand of her own agency evoked in every word she writes.

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