

bell hooks will forever be a foundational force in Black feminist thought

She was able to touch so many people, at so many levels, across so many boundaries, because she was a brazen truth-teller and willing to be vulnerable



'It all begins and ends, for her, with love.'

Barbara Ransby

Sat 18 Dec 2021

I first met bell hooks in the late 1980s at a feminist conference where I, and a slew of other graduate students, slept on the floor of her hotel suite because the meeting was overbooked. For the next three-plus decades we were colleagues, intellectual comrades and interlocutors who sometimes disagreed, but shared a bond of mutual respect and solidarity. I will miss her words and her presence in our lives.

bell hooks (AKA Gloria Jean Watkins), feminist writer, radical thinker and teacher, died on Wednesday, 15 December at the age of 69, at her home in Berea, Kentucky. She was the daughter of working-class parents born in a small town in the Jim Crow South. She eventually went to Stanford University on scholarship and worked as a telephone operator to cover her other expenses. Borrowing her nom de plume from her outspoken great-grandmother, hooks went on to become one of the foremost feminist intellectuals and radical writers of her time. Her writings spanned the spectrum from capitalism and imperialism, to education, masculinity, beauty and love. Her influence is vast and her death leaves a painful void for those who knew and loved her. The outpouring of respect and tributes are testimony to the reach, in breadth and depth, of her work and the power of her legacy.

hooks was as prolific as she was provocative. She wrote or co-wrote over 40 books ranging from children's books to accessible theoretical texts. The titles of her books say a lot about her political message and her intellectual framework. In *Feminist Theory: Margin to Center* (1984), one of her most influential texts, she challenges us to embrace a feminist politics that is holistic, democratic, anti-capitalist and inclusive of all genders, including masculine ones. She rejects bourgeois white feminist writers that re-inscribe other hierarchies of power and domination in their politics and practices. These messages are reinforced in her related text, *Feminism is for Everybody*. Her works – including *Teaching to Transgress*, *Breaking Bread: Insurgent Intellectual Life* (co-written with Cornel West), and *Remembered Rapture: The Writer at Work* – all speak to her love of books and ideas as tools for radical social change. “My writing is a form of activism,” she once told me.

hooks was a feminist through and through, but she was not a congenial feminist. She was a critic, a provocateur, and an interrogator. “Do we have to call every woman sister?” she wondered in one essay, suggesting that sisterhood and feminism were not about biology or essentialist notions of group identity, but about politics and values, and struggle. Instead of the more academic term, “intersectionality”, hooks preferred to name “imperialist-white supremacist-capitalist-patriarchy” as the interlocking systems that needed to be combatted. There is a power in naming the problem and she did not shy from that. She also did not shy from critiques of other women, including Black women, when their politics and views did not align with hers – from self-promoting mainstream academics to popular pro-capitalist pop stars.

hooks was a theorist, a rigorous thinker and a brazen and eloquent writer, whose books are taught in college classrooms around the world. However, what was most important to her was accessibility and relevance. She wanted her ideas to engage diverse and grassroots audiences, and they did: from kitchen tables to book clubs to prison yards. One of the most powerful testaments to hooks's influence and ability to reach people in unexpected places is the feminist study group started by a group of incarcerated men in the California prison system to explore and root out assumptions and practices that underly toxic forms of masculinity. Their project was featured in a 2018 documentary called *The Feminists in Cell Block Y*. Their syllabus featured the writings of bell hooks. Her words, according to them, transformed their lives.

hooks was able to touch so many people, at so many levels, across so many boundaries of difference, because she was a brazen truth-teller and willing to be vulnerable and transparent about her own life, pain and contradictions. “I was in an abusive relationship,” she confessed in one interview. In her writings she talked openly about a difficult childhood and a tyrannical father who could also at times be protective and kind. She opened up, especially in her later writings, about her own personal struggles, her rages and disappointments, her traumas and her fears.

Sometimes theoretical writers distance themselves from the topics they write about with a feigned bloodless objectivity. hooks did the opposite. She invited us to care, to feel, and to experience the world through her lens. It all begins and ends, for her, with love. “The moment we begin to love, we begin to move against domination,” she once wrote. But not everyone loved her back when she spoke truth to power. hooks told her truths wherever she went and was not afraid of opposition. As a college commencement speaker in Texas, a year after the 9/11 attacks and the launch of George Bush's so-called “war on terror”, hooks experienced a chorus of boos from

parents and graduates as she loudly condemned war, violence and racism. She could never be accused of being a fair-weather radical. She took her Black left feminist politics with her wherever she went.

hooks had an unconventional career path, by choice. She made her own road, spoke her own truths, and won the hearts and minds of many along the way. The social media tributes to her since her death speak to the ways that her vast body of work changed lives, launched activist careers, affirmed values and saved others from isolation and despair. In addition to fans and followers, she also had a handful of devoted lifelong friends.

The following touching memory of hooks was shared with me by my dear friend and hers, the Black feminist pathmaker Dr Beverly Guy-Sheftall: “Loving my feminist friend/comrade for 40 years – unconditionally and deeply – enriched my life in ways that I am only now grasping. We gathered at Spelman, Oberlin, the New School and of course Berea College. We talked about books, politics, shopping, partners, the lives we crafted, the friends we shared, our dreams and disappointments. When I saw her at her home in Berea on November 25, I thought it might be the last time. I told her I would always love her and her writings ...”

She is forever a foundational force in Black feminist thought and praxis, and in the work of all movements that are attempting to take us beyond, to paraphrase hooks, imperialism, white supremacy, capitalism and patriarchy. Rest in power, dear sister, your work is done and we are better for it.

- *Barbara Ransby is a historian, writer and activist. She is the author of *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement* and a professor at the University of Illinois at Chicago, where she directs the Social Justice Initiative*