

bell hooks: A Revolutionary Who Led With Love by Barbara Ransby

bell hooks poses for a portrait on Dec. 16, 1996, in New York City. PHOTO BY KARJEAN LEVINE/GETTY IMAGES

I have known radicals and revolutionaries who love “the people” but whose everyday lives are replete with contradictions. The late bell hooks was by no means perfect, but she was impressively consistent. She took seriously the notion that a revolution had to center love and was as much about transforming ourselves as it was about transforming the world.

I met hooks when I was a graduate student at the University of Michigan in the late 1980s and early '90s. I have many memories of her, but a Chicago activist now in her 60s shared with me a story that captures her essence. My friend encountered a woman who was a domestic abuse survivor, felt she had no place to turn, and was afraid to leave her abusive situation. She reached out to a number of well-known Black feminists, and hooks was the only one to reply. It was 20-some years ago, and it impacted her deeply. That story proved to me that in every way she could, hooks tried to live her values and politics.

hooks leaves behind an impressive body of dozens of books that offer treatises on societal problems. In her earlier books, such as *Killing Rage: Ending Racism*, she talked about systems and movements. In her later work, starting with the 1999 book *All About Love: New Visions*, she focused our attention on the importance of love, community, and self, not as escapist individualistic distractions but as part and parcel of changing the world. We cannot continue to hurt, undermine, and denigrate each other and simultaneously build a better society, she observed.

She insisted we not compromise our definition of freedom.

“Whenever domination is present love is lacking,” she wrote in her 2000 book, *Feminism is for Everybody*. “The soul of our politics is the commitment to ending domination,” she added, insisting that the personal, including intimate relations, had to be built on an egalitarian foundation of mutual respect. Male-headed patriarchal families were antithetical to that kind of relationship democracy.

But it was not good enough, hooks insisted, to simply declare oneself a feminist. To say “I am” a feminist was not nearly as impactful, she wrote, as saying “I believe in feminism,” because to declare a chosen belief begs the question of how to explain it to others and enact it in community, political, personal, and cultural practice. So, feminism was not merely an identity for hooks, but a politic and set of values made meaningful through

action.

hooks rejected narrow constructions of single-group or single-issue liberation strategies. To her, they were a dead end. A holistic approach was an intersectional approach, and while she explicitly named White supremacist capitalist patriarchy as the core of the system that needed changing, she was also an environmentalist, a children's rights advocate, an ally of LGBTQ and disability rights communities. In an essay in her book *Belonging: A Culture of Place*, hooks writes about environmentalism: "When we love the Earth, we are able to love ourselves more fully. I believe this. The ancestors taught me it was so."

It is her big vision that inspired so many people. She insisted we not compromise our definition of freedom. No one should be thrown under the bus, she argued.

Some saw hooks as a bit of a contrarian. But this was one of her virtues, not her vices. She argued and prodded and never agreed for the sake of politeness. "Wait a minute, I don't think I agree with that," she would say bluntly. This was not a cause for acrimony but an opportunity for discovery and growth. In this way, her praxis very much resembled that of another Black feminist leader, Ella Baker, whose biography I authored.

hooks viewed struggle, resistance, and reimagining as both collective and intergenerational. Although she is no longer with us on this Earth, we can think of the body of work she left behind, her musings and gentle manifestos, and her nudges and provocations, such as the notion that we are all connected, but we cannot ignore our inequalities, privileges, and vested interests.

Some of those interests we have to consciously divest from: Racial capitalism is as much an obstacle to our full humanity as is racism, sexism, homophobia, and transphobia. Climate justice impacts us all, but some people are more vulnerable than others. We have to not replicate hierarchies and elite rankings within oppressed groups. Black millionaires are not a solution to Black poverty. Black cisgender men enjoying the masculine privileges of White men does nothing to liberate Black women, queer folk, or children. Black heterosexuals are only one part of Black life. Black queer and transgender folk have to be centered in our thinking and practice of liberation.

All of these beautifully consistent ideals emerge from hooks' work, and that is why her mantra of "margin to center" was so powerfully insurgent. Today, hooks' ideas are widely embraced among progressives—a testament to how effectively she helped us center intersectional radical politics.

hooks will be remembered as a truth teller, an intellectual rabble rouser, a lover of humans and the planet, and a wonderfully difficult woman in the very best sense of that expression