

## BELL HOOKS: RADICAL LOVE PERSONIFIED

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bell hooks was a powerful educator, activist, and scholar who truly embodied radical love. As a working class, Black feminist, she unapologetically critiqued the many forms of oppression in society through her eloquent writing and captivating talks in various academic and activist circles. She was an inspirational person and has left a lasting mark in the hearts and minds of the many people who cherish her work. The world has lost a powerful Black woman who taught those of us who read and valued her scholarship, teaching, and activism how to be a little braver, bolder, and unapologetic in our own work. Although she has physically left this earth, her spirit, her words, her wisdom, and her radical love lives on. She will not be forgotten because her words have meant so much to so many people. bell hooks, born Gloria Jean Watkins on September 25, 1952, and died on December 15, 2021, is someone I never met, but she spoke to me from the page like no other author ever has or ever could. bell hooks is an important part of my education journey, and *currere* is a framework that fits well with her writing.

She is powerful, passionate, courageous  
She is the truth teller you didn't know you needed  
She is the wind in your sails when you need an extra push  
She is the words of wisdom when you can't hold on to hope  
She is the storyteller who inspires you to tell and weave your own stories  
She is the activist who pushes you out of silence  
She is engaged pedagogy and radical love personified  
She gives you critical hope when the sun refuses to shine  
She is a light in the darkness and a glimmer in the stream  
She is a working class, Black, radical feminist, and she will never be silent  
She is bell hooks

### THE POWER OF THE PEN

*I am because the story is.*

*-bell hooks, 2010*

James Baldwin (1963) powerfully wrote,

You think your pain and your heartbreak are unprecedented in the history of the world, but then you read. It was books that taught me that the things that tormented me most were the very things that connected me with all the people who were alive, who had ever been alive. (p. 89)

This is how I felt when I first read bell hooks. One of my first transformative experiences in grad school was finding the scholarship of bell hooks. Her words spoke to me and began to heal the wounds I had incurred so long ago. Although I will forever be haunted and shaped by my prior schooling and personal experiences, the memories are no longer a painful wound; now they act as a compass leading the way and helping me navigate the spaces within the academy, spaces that often feel unloving, violent, and hostile. I learned

that my experiences, both good and bad, shape who I am as an educator, an activist, and a scholar. bell hooks (2000b) helped me come to class consciousness through her powerful book, *where we stand: Class Matters*. Prior to reading this book, I had not yet made sense of the ways in which my social class had impacted and continues to impact my educational experiences. hooks opened the door to *currere* before I knew what *currere* was and before I had fully begun to examine my own educational trajectory. hooks had her own need to reflect on the past and the present in order to envision the way forward.

Writing about the past often places one at risk for evoking a nostalgia that simply looks back with longing and idealizes. Locating a space of genuineness, of integrity as I recall the past and endeavor to connect it to the ideals and yearnings of the present has been crucial to my process. (hooks, 2009, p. 4)

hooks writes about the importance of memory and reminds us that “memories offer us a world where there is no death, where we are sustained by rituals of regard and recollection” (p. 5). It’s important that we tap into our memories as a space for self-reflection, a way of being in the present moment and a tool for imagining the future.

#### *HOW THE PAST HAUNTS US*

*Examining life retrospectively we are there and not there, watching and watched.*

*-bell hooks, 1996*

I grew up in the presence of powerful, independent women. At the time it just seemed natural, but in the absence of men, the women in my life were able to more fully step into their power. I do not mean to suggest that women cannot do so in the company of men, but it is much harder to do so when patriarchy and toxic masculinity are the foundation of those relationships. Women can also perpetuate these same patterns of oppression, but in that space where men did not govern our existence (at least not at home), there was a beautiful freedom that I often see absent in many other families. At the same time, my family feared that we, my sister and I, would be harmed by men. We were ferociously protected from that anticipated harm and to our own detriment in many ways. From these independent strong women, we learned to be fearful, silent, and compliant, all while watching those same women rebel against the system. It was confusing, suffocating, and profoundly shaped who I am today. bell hooks (2009) describes this dualism in her book, *Belonging: A Culture of Place*, “To me the family has always been that place of familiarity that holds and hurts us” (p. 59). Love and protection can stifle self-actualization, even when well intentioned. I learned to be quiet and to make myself small. It took many years to understand how to tap into my own power and how to use my power in the service of equity and justice. One of the women who helped me find my voice and learn to “talk back” was bell hooks (1989, p. 5). She states the importance of coming to voice:

Moving from silence into speech is for the oppressed, the colonized, the exploited, and those who stand and struggle side by side a gesture of defiance that heals, that makes new life and new growth possible. It is that act of speech, of “talking back,” that is no mere gesture of empty words, that is the expression of our movement from object to subject—the liberated voice. (hooks, 1989, p. 9)

I recognize that our experiences are very different, particularly in regard to race, yet her work speaks across race. However, it is important that I recognize, as a white woman,

that I have unearned privilege that helps to mitigate the oppressive conditions placed on working class women. Whiteness has shaped me and is something that I must personally reflect upon and work through—this is lifelong work. I believe reading, valuing, and giving credit to the work of Black feminists is part of that work. Without their words, their work, their ability to persist despite the multiple forms of oppression they face, I would not be the scholar or the person I am today.

#### *RADICAL LOVE IN THE PRESENT*

*Remember your roots, the seeds of resistance sowed into the soil with love, and hope for the future will be the freedom fighters who emerge tomorrow.*

*-Radina, 2018*

Currently, I am working on being present for my students, my family, friends, and colleagues. I want to engage with the people I care about through the notion of radical love and walk alongside others as they step into their own power. hooks's (2002) writing acts as a powerful guide to help us begin to embody radical love: "We need to return to love and reclaim its transformative power" (p. 15). But we must also remember that "love is an action, a participatory emotion" (hooks, 2000a, p. 165). Further, "We should not conceptualize love as a noun, but as a verb, an action that is fueled by our deepest hopes and dreams for a future that is yet to be" (Radina & Schwartz, 2019, p. 5). Radical love requires humility, courage, vulnerability, and grace. Radical love creates a path that is intertwined with critical hope—both require action. bell hooks embodied radical love in teaching, scholarship, activism, and community building. Her words capture not only the tragedy of our current conditions, but the possibility of transformation through collective struggle. This collective struggle must be grounded in radical love and pushed forward through critical hope. Many conceptualize hope as merely thinking a new reality into existence, but critical hope requires action. Radical love and critical hope without action dissipate into the air and turn to dust—radical love and critical hope are embedded in our bones and, thus, cannot be separated from the ways in which we move in this world. bell hooks's words help us remember: "Life is full of peaks and valleys, triumphs and tribulations. We often cause ourselves suffering, by wanting only to live in a world that is flat, plain, consistent" (p. 26). There is beauty in the struggle for justice—we need to conceptualize the struggle as a way of being in the world. hooks (2000a) reminds us that "all of the great social movements for freedom and justice in our society have promoted a love ethic" (p. 98). However, just as important is the notion that "there can be no love without justice" (hooks, 2002, p. 66). Radical love propels us forward, tapping into critical hope and prompting us to take action.

#### *MOVING FORWARD*

*I have always come home to Kentucky but I was just visiting. Now I have come home to stay—to stay forever is what I dream even though I know that everyday dreams change.*

*-hooks, 2009*

It is with heavy hearts that we move forward without this beautiful soul walking in this world. Yet, hooks planted so many seeds of resistance, we can now wander through the beautiful garden her life's work has left behind. She is forever with us through her words, her actions, her unapologetic embodiment of radical love and critical hope. Those who are mourning this loss may find comfort in her words, "Love empowers us to live fully and die well. Death becomes, then, not an end to life but a part of living"

(hooks, 2000a, p. 197). This begs the question, how do we carry this work forward? How do we sow our own seeds of resistance and cultivate gardens that are fertilized by radical love? We do so by refusing to remain silent about the things that matter and by working in solidarity with our students, peers, and the communities where our work is grounded. “The heart of justice is truth telling, seeing ourselves and the world the way it is rather than the way we want it to be” (hooks, 2000a, p. 33). Truth telling requires educators to be courageous, vulnerable, and unapologetic. This is the embodiment of “education as the practice of freedom” and creates space for educators to raise the critical consciousness of their students (hooks, 2010, p. 27). However, this is not a one-way process; teachers are engaged in the learning process.

When education is the practice of freedom, students are not the only ones who are asked to share, to confess. Engaged pedagogy does not simply seek to empower students. Any classroom that employs a holistic model of learning will also be a place where teachers grow, and are empowered by the process. That empowerment cannot happen if we refuse to be vulnerable while encouraging students to take risks. (hooks, 1994, p. 21)

This way of being in the classroom also allows us to better support students who have been historically marginalized. We must work to decolonize our curriculum and pedagogy to better serve all of our students. We must embody radical love in our classrooms, because “love will always move us away from domination in all its forms. Love will always challenge and change us” (hooks, 2003, p.137).

Finally, we carry this work forward by continuing to raise up the voices of educator-scholar activists like bell hooks, who have helped to create a strong foundation and a lighted pathway for the struggle ahead. We do so by recognizing the work of women of color, whose work is often pushed to the margins. As hooks suggested, we move this work from the margins to the center by never forgetting the women who made this movement and continue to oil the wheels of resistance. As a white woman, I can work on being a co-conspirator by taking action, raising my voice and most importantly supporting, loving, and working in solidarity with women of color. Thank you bell hooks! The world will never be the same because of your powerful words, courage, activism, and embodiment of radical love.

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