

United States: bell hooks — a fiery Black feminist

Wednesday 12 January 2022, by [MIAH Malik](#) (Date first published: 5 January 2022).

Radical feminist, scholar and activist bell hooks died on December 15 in the United States. She was 69.

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Born in the segregated town of Brea, Kentucky, hooks rose to prominence during the second wave of the feminist movement in the US in the 1970s.

At its height, the women's rights movement won important victories, including nationwide legal abortion rights — under fierce attack by the right today.

Hooks was born Gloria Jean Watkins and adopted “bell hooks” as a pseudonym — using lower case letters to stress her writings over herself as an individual. She was widely read for her critiques of the white-dominated feminist movement and the male-led Black civil rights movement and radical Black militancy of the time.



bell hooks (r) with Zillah Eisenstein. Photo: @ZEisenstein/twitter

The Washington Post described hooks as a “trailblazer” who sought to empower people of all races, classes, and genders. She participated in and helped shape ongoing debates about justice and discrimination in the US.

Hooks served as distinguished professor in residence in Appalachian Studies at Berea College in Kentucky. The college hosts the bell hooks center “to honor hooks’ legacy by supporting students as social justice leaders”.

The personal and political

Hooks wrote more than 30 books. She mixed the personal with the political, examining Madonna's music videos, critiquing the Supreme Court appointment of Clarence Thomas, discussing the representation of Black Americans in film and exploring the nature of love.

The WP noted in its December 16 tribute: "Honing a voice that was by turns fiery and uplifting, earnest and wry, Dr. hooks became known as one of the country's leading feminist theorists — a 'rare rock star of a public intellectual', as Time magazine put it last year. She appeared on panels with scholars such as Cornel West and Henry Louis Gates Jr. while reaching readers far outside the academy, expanding her audience through self-help and children's books."

Ain't I A Woman

I first read hooks in the 1980s, after the publication of *Ain't I A Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (1981, South End Press). It was titled after Black anti-slavery activist Sojourner Truth's "Ain't I A Woman?" speech given at the Akron Ohio Women's Rights Convention in 1851.

Hooks' brilliant work inspired Black women and other women of colour as well as many revolutionary Black men:

As hooks wrote, "Although the women's movement motivated hundreds of women to write on the woman question, it failed to generate in depth critical analyses of the Black female experience.

"Most feminists assumed that problems Black women experienced are caused by racism — not sexism. The assumption that we can divorce the issue of race from sex, or sex from race, has so clouded the vision of America thinkers and writers on the 'woman' question that most discussions of sexism, sexist oppression, or woman's place in society are distorted, biased and inaccurate.

"We cannot form an accurate picture of woman's status by simply calling attention to the role assigned females under patriarchy. More specifically, we cannot form an accurate picture of the status of Black women by simply focusing on racial hierarchies."

The white suffragettes never understood this point, which is why the 1920 victory in the struggle for women's right to vote in the US (the 19th Amendment) only applied to white women. Black women were still categorised as Black people first — and had few rights.

Hooks explained that Black women faced the national oppression of race as well as patriarchal oppression. Black women workers suffered a trio of oppression: sex, race and class (super exploitation).

The theme of hooks' writings was the intersectionality (a term she did not use) of race, capitalism and gender. She described it as the ability of capitalism to (re)produce, (re)generate. and perpetuate systems of oppression and class domination.

Hooks describes the structures of power as "imperialist-white-supremacist-capitalist-patriarchy".

A free woman

Rebecca Walker studied under hooks at Yale University. She became a close friend and is a

prominent Black feminist and daughter of Pulitzer Prize winner Alice Walker. In her tribute in the Los Angeles Times, she wrote:

“I had grown up with serious tutelage on all things race, class and gender, but bell taught me more: how to read, how to see, how to discern what lay beneath. bell was my mentor, my friend, my sister in struggle.”

Hooks had a similar impact on many others, especially women of colour. Walker wrote: “bell hooks was a free woman. She saw racism in feminism, classism in progressivism, and white supremacy in a lover’s kiss.

“bell didn’t speak truth to power because bell was power; bell left the margins way back before she taught us that we were all in them. She stormed the center like a general: without permission, or the faintest idea that it might not be hers to claim. Her mind, free and unfettered, unafraid of knowing its own velocity, galloped ahead to take her rightful place, far beyond the mediocrity of the status quo.”

Yet since hooks worked as an academic and teacher, many socialists are not as familiar with her importance to Black feminism and the fight against white supremacy.

I enjoyed her critical analysis, especially her explanations of the leadership role of strong Black women. It applies to the current role of Black women in the racial justice and Black Lives Matter movements today.

That leadership by women was present in the antislavery, anti-segregation movements. But it was not fully recognised because of racism and white supremacy.

Hooks joins the pantheon of great radical Black women and men who fought and still fight to end the system of capitalist oppression in the US and around the world.

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P.S.

- Green Left Weekly Issue 1329. January 5, 2022:
<https://www.greenleft.org.au/content/bell-hooks-fiery-black-feminist>