

The Wide-Angle Vision, and Legacy, of bell hooks

The pioneering feminist scholar, who died this week, wrote about women, race, love, healing, pop culture and much more, always keeping Black women at the center.



The writer bell hooks, in 1996. “I came to theory desperate, wanting to comprehend — to grasp what was happening around and within me,” she once wrote. Credit...Karjean Levine/Getty Images)

By Jennifer Schuessler

Dec. 16, 2021

The news that bell hooks had died at 69 spread quickly across social media on Wednesday, prompting a flood of posts featuring favorite quotes about love, justice, men, women, community and healing, as well as testimonials about how this pioneering Black feminist writer had changed, or saved, lives.

If the outpouring felt more intense than the usual tributes to departed scholars, admirers say that merely reflected the extraordinary way she mixed the emotional with the intellectual in her quest to make the experiences of Black women not just visible, but central to a sweeping reimagining of society.

“I think we can’t overstate her influence,” Imani Perry, a professor of African American studies at Princeton said. “For so many people, bell hooks was their first introduction to social theory, critiques of patriarchy, white supremacy and capitalism.”

But even more, she said, hooks’s writing — and her impact — was personal.

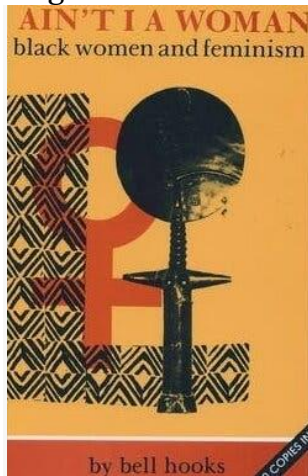
“She came from this really sophisticated world of cultural theory, but she connected it to her very particular experience of growing up in Jim Crow Kentucky,” Perry said. “She had all the chops to write in this more traditional, drier academic style, but she chose differently because she wanted to connect with everyday people.”

Perry first met hooks in the early 1990s. She was working as an intern at South End Press, which had published “Ain’t I a Woman,” hooks’s groundbreaking 1981 book about the impact of both racism and sexism on Black women.

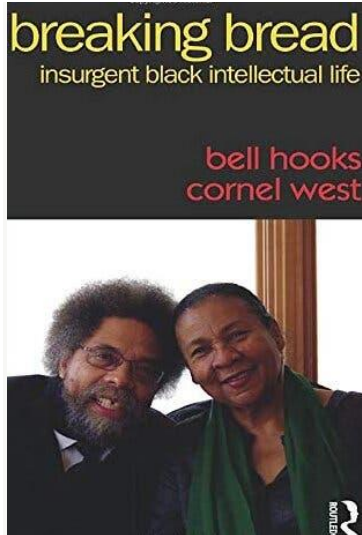
It was a book about intersectionality, before there was a word for it — just one example of how the more than 30 books she wrote anticipated debates and concepts, from self-care to [cultural appropriation](#), that are mainstays today.

Kimberlé Crenshaw, the legal scholar who coined the term “intersectionality” [in 1989](#), said that hooks’s work gave theoretical ballast to political organizing that was happening on the ground. It helped make it possible to critique both white-led feminism and the male-dominated antiracism movement “without feeling like a traitor.”

“Sometimes people say things, or write things, that so capture your experience that you forget never not knowing it or thinking it,” Crenshaw said. “bell is one of those people.”



She began writing “Ain’t I a Woman,” her groundbreaking 1981 book, at the age of 19, when she was an undergraduate



She was the rare woman in the generation of rising Black public intellectuals like Cornel West, with whom she wrote “Breaking Bread” in 1991.

“Ain’t I a Woman,” which hooks began writing when she was 19, was part of a wave of Black women’s writing in the 1970s, from Toni Morrison’s “The Bluest Eye” and Tony Cade Bambara’s anthology “The Black Woman” (both from 1970), through Alice Walker’s landmark 1975 [essay](#) “In Search of Zora Neale Hurston” and Angela Davis’s 1981 “Women, Race and Class.” (“bell hooks” was the pen name of Gloria Watkins, derived from the name of her great-grandmother, and written in lowercase letters to shift identity from herself to her ideas.)

In her next book, “Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center,” hooks gave a crisp definition of feminism as “the struggle to end sexist oppression.” If she was critical of “white, bourgeois, hegemonic dominance of feminist movements,” she also warned against using such critiques to “trash, reject or dismiss” feminism itself.

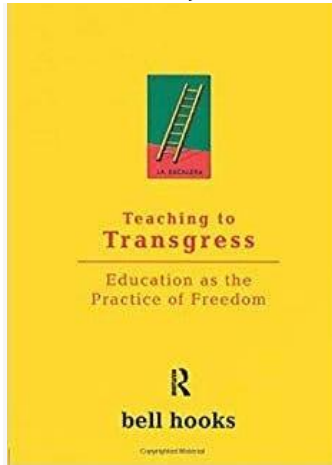
In the late 1980s, hooks came to broader prominence in the heyday of a new generation of university-based Black public intellectuals, and she was the rare woman in a circle seemingly defined by male scholars like Henry Louis Gates Jr., Michael Eric Dyson and Cornel West (with whom she wrote “Breaking Bread” in 1991).

But while hooks spent her entire career in the academy, teaching at Yale, Oberlin, Berea College in Kentucky and other institutions, she was not solely of it. For her, theory wasn’t an abstract exercise, but a tool for self-understanding and survival.

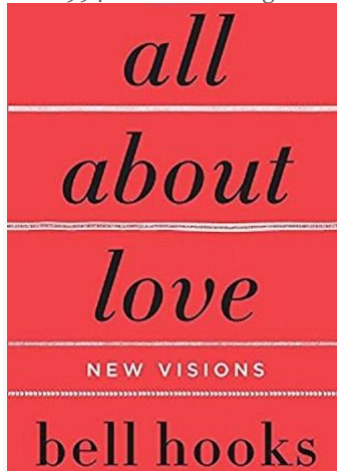
“I came to theory because I was hurting,” she wrote in her 1991 essay [Theory as Liberatory Practice](#). “I came to theory desperate, wanting to comprehend — to grasp what was happening around and within me.”

She saw the university setting, which was dismissed by some as an elitist space, instead as a site of revolutionary possibility. But she also engaged with popular culture, in essays that could be as rhetorically blunt as they were intellectually serpentine.

In "[Madonna: Plantation Mistress or Soul Sister?](#)," included in her 1992 book "Black Looks: Race and Representation," she unpacked the singer's groin-grabbing appropriation of "phallic Black masculinity," which she used to "taunt" white men with what they lack. ("Madonna may hate the phallus, but she longs to possess its power," hooks wrote.)



Her 1994 book "Teaching to Transgress" described the university classroom as a space of potential liberation.



"All About Love," from 2001, was the first in a series of books on love and relationships.

In another chapter, she [criticized](#) the 1991 documentary "Paris Is Burning" for failing to "interrogate whiteness," and instead glorifying and sanitizing a drag culture grounded in "the fantasy that ruling-class white culture is the quintessential site of unrestricted joy, freedom, power and pleasure." But her critiques of Black culture were more complicated than the bite-size quotes in media interviews might have suggested. In a [1993 article](#) in The New York Times about the boiling controversy over gangsta rap, she likened it to crack. "It's like we have consumed the worst stereotypes white people have put on Black people," she said.

But later, she lamented that a [1993 interview](#) she did [with Ice Cube](#) in Spin magazine had been "cut to nothing," as part of a "mass media setup" all too familiar to Black thinkers.

“To white-dominated mass media, the controversy over gangsta rap makes a great spectacle,” she [wrote](#). Journalists and producers that called seeking “the hard-core ‘feminist’ trash of gangsta rap,” she noted, usually lost interest when they encountered instead “the hard-core feminist critique of white supremacist capitalist patriarchy.”

She was not without her critics, including among other Black feminists. In a 1995 article in *The Village Voice*, Michele Wallace (whose [1979 book](#) “Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman” came out two years before “Ain’t I a Woman”) derided what she saw as her repetitive, dogmatic style.

“Without the unlovely P.C. code phrases, ‘white supremacy,’ ‘patriarchal domination’ and ‘self-recovery,’ hooks couldn’t write a sentence,” Wallace wrote.

And in 2016, hooks’s critical remarks about Beyoncé’s visual album “Lemonade,” which she described as “capitalist moneymaking at its best,” caused [a furor](#) among fellow Black feminist scholars and writers.

“It’s all about the body, and the body as commodity,” she [wrote](#) in *The Guardian*. “This is certainly not radical or revolutionary. From slavery to the present day, black female bodies, clothed and unclothed, have been bought and sold.”

To some, hooks had grown “detached from the hearts and minds of Black women,” as a writer for *Ebony* put it. But as with her [earlier criticisms](#) of Beyoncé as being complicit in the visual “construction of herself as a slave,” hooks’s assessment was more nuanced than the [headline-making quotes](#) suggested.

And if her criticisms seemed out of step with the evolving pop-culture-savvy Black feminist thought she had helped birth, they also illustrated its depth.



In a 1994 essay, hooks, shown at home in 1996, criticized the media's interest in seeking out Black critics of gangsta rap. "For white-dominated media," she wrote, the controversy "makes a great spectacle." Credit...Joyce Dopkeen

"We learned we could disagree with her," the historian Anthea Butler, who was critical of hooks at the time, [wrote this week](#) at msnbc.com. "Looking back, hooks's criticism of Beyoncé was a moment to embrace how feminists, specifically Black feminists, embrace other paradigms of feminist power."

hooks became intellectually famous mostly the old-fashioned way: by writing. She was on television infrequently (and only briefly [on Twitter](#)), but her work resonated with younger, very online feminists. In 2015, the feminist site Jezebel declared that "[saved by the bell hooks](#)," which added (rigorously footnoted) quotes from her books to screenshots from the white-bread television show "Saved by the Bell," was the Tumblr account of the year.

Perry, the Princeton professor, said that students she knew were just as likely to come to hooks's work through personal reading as through course assignments. That may have been particularly true for her books on love, a subject she turned to in the early 2000s in a series of books including "All About Love" "Communion" and "The Will to Change: Men, Masculinity and Love." (Feminist writing, hooks said in the book, too often "did not tell us about the deep inner misery of men.")

Today, those titles are often shelved in bookstores under self-help. And on the internet, hooks can seem to share the double-edged canonization of one of her childhood muses, Emily Dickinson, another radical woman writer [whose words lend themselves](#) to decontextualized [poster-ready #inspo](#).

But if interpersonal relationships struck some as an unserious subject, hooks was unfazed. Love, she said in [a 2017 interview](#) with the website Shondaland, "requires integrity, that there be a congruency between what we think, say and do."

Love, she said, "is first and foremost about knowledge."