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bell hooks

Amanda Moras

Sacred Heart University, morasa@sacredheart.edu

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HOOKS, BELL (1952–)

bell hooks is a scholar, a writer, and an activist who has made various contributions to both feminist and antiracist scholarship and theorizing. A self-identified feminist, she has used her work to engage topics such as feminist theory, White supremacy, capitalism, and postmodernism. She has been especially instrumental in challenging the classist and racist assumptions of mainstream second-wave feminism as well as the sexist biases in the Black Civil Rights Movement.

hooks's work has illustrated the ways in which both the mainstream feminist movement and the Black civil

rights movement marginalized the interests of Black women. Her first book, *Ain't I a Woman* (1981), focused in particular on the assumptions of these social movements in regard to Black women. In this work, which she first began writing at 19 years of age, she explored how Black women were placed in particularly precarious positions during slavery because of the intersecting oppressions of racism and sexism that affected their lives. She also articulated specific manifestations of racism in the women's movement and Black women's relationship to feminism.

hooks's body of work as a whole has influenced the ideologies and directions of feminist movements, urging a broadly defined feminist agenda with the task of leading movements of resistance against sexism, racism, and classism. Her later piece, *Feminist Theory, Margin to Center*, continued to urge feminists to rethink issues of race, class, violence, work, and families under the guise of a more inclusive feminist ideology.

About Her Life

bell hooks was born Gloria Jean Watkins in Kentucky in 1952. She was one of seven children, with five sisters and one brother. She later adopted the name bell hooks as a writing pseudonym and then began using it for lectures as well. The name is a family name and belonged to her great-grandmother on her mother's side. In her essay, "To Gloria, Who She Is: On Using a Pseudonym," she explained how taking on this name was a strategy of empowerment that enabled her to find her own voice. hooks received a bachelor's degree in English from Stanford University in 1973, and three years later she received her master's in English from the University of Wisconsin–Madison. She later obtained her doctorate from the University of California, Santa Cruz, where she wrote her dissertation on the work of Pulitzer Prize–winning writer Toni Morrison.

hooks has taught at various institutions of higher education, including the University of California, Santa Cruz; San Francisco State University; Yale University; Oberlin College; and the City College of New York, where she held the position of distinguished professor of English. She currently holds a position as distinguished writer-in-residence at Berea College in Berea, Kentucky.

hooks's pedagogical work has received a significant amount of attention, and she has written extensively on feminist and antiracist pedagogy and overall how education can be a holistic and liberating experience

for students and teachers alike. She has cited Paulo Freire and Thich Nhat Hanh as two major influences on her pedagogical work.

Her Writings

hooks has published more than thirty books throughout her career, including *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics*; *Black Looks: Race and Representation*; *Sisters of the Yam: Black Women and Self-Recovery*; *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*; *Bone Black: Memories of Girlhood*; *Reel to Real: Race, Sex, and Class at the Movies*; *Wounds of Passion: A Writing Life*; *The Will to Change: Men, Masculinity, and Love*; and *Feminism Is for Everybody: Passionate Politics*. These works address topics such as feminism, love, self-esteem, masculinity, racism, film, and the writing process.

hooks has also participated in various collaborations, with perhaps the most famous of these being *Breaking Bread: Insurgent Black Intellectual Life*, which is composed of a series of dialogues, interviews, and essays written by her and Cornel West, another prominent African American intellectual. Other collaborations include *Daughters of the Dust* (written with Julie Dash and Toni Cade Bambara) and *Homegrown: Engaged Cultural Criticism* (written with Amalia Mesa-Bains). She is also the author of four children's books: *Skin Again*, *Happy to Be Nappy*, *Be Boy Buzz*, and *Homemade Love*. She has also published two works of poetry: an early chapbook titled *And There We Wept* and a later book titled *A Women's Mourning Song*.

hooks has also produced various works of cultural criticism focusing on films such as *Mad Max*, *Crooklyn*, and *Do the Right Thing*. Her pieces of cultural criticism interrogate the politics of gendered and raced representation and issues of commodification. The body and breadth of hooks's work reflect a lifetime commitment to feminist and antiracist scholarly production and activism. Her work is widely read in various humanities and social science courses, among others.

Amanda Moras

See also African American Studies; African American Women and Work; Black Intellectuals; Body Image; Civil Rights Movement, Women and; Feminism; Feminism, Black; Gender and Race, Intersection of; Internal Colonialism; White Racism