

Emancipatory Affect: bell hooks on Love and Liberation

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Love is a recurring theme in bell hooks' thought, where it is explicitly linked to her understanding of freedom and liberation. In this essay, I will bring together some of hooks' most important writings on love in order to clarify her account of the relationship between love and liberation. I will argue that, for hooks, the practice of love and the practice of freedom are inextricably connected, and any liberatory project must be undertaken within the context of an ethics of love.

By the time of the publication of Rawls' *Theory of Justice* in 1971, "liberation" had ceased to function as a significant trope in anglophone political theory. To be sure, *liberty*, understood in the traditional liberal sense of the ability to pursue one's vision of the good life, remained an important political virtue, but the political aim of *liberation* had become too closely associated with Marxism to find much favor in mainstream anglophone thought. Struggles against domination, to the extent that political theory addressed them at all, were conceived in terms of Right, Equality, Fairness, and Justice. Liberty and autonomy remained *a* good among others to be protected within the "basic structures" of society (Rawls, 1999: 6), but liberation as a central *telos* of political philosophy had lost its Enlightenment-era prominence in the 20th century shift to a more procedural account of political life.

Feminist theorists and philosophers of race, more recently, have made crucial efforts to place questions of domination and liberation back at the forefront of political philosophy. They have called into question the strictly procedural account of justice focused on ideal conditions of rational choice that has become the dominant paradigm of political theory in the English-speaking world. Such an approach can obscure relations and institutions of domination, making it difficult to even theorize the liberation of those so dominated, let alone act to bring that liberation about. For bell hooks, this critique of proceduralism and ideal theory is important, but omits another crucial aspect of human liberation. Domination and oppression, she tells us, are not simply mechanistic operations governing the distribution of resources or the production and conferral of status. They are also ways of treating and relating to one another that exemplify a marked *lack of Love*. "A culture of domination", hooks tells us, "is anti-love" (1994: 293), and we must turn to love if we are to properly understand and bring about human liberation.

In the essay “Love as the Practice of Freedom,” hooks makes a case for the need for an “ethic of love” to characterize our efforts toward positive change (1994: 289-298). She tells us that “the moment we choose to love we begin to move toward freedom, to act in ways that liberate ourselves and others” (1994: 298). Quoting Martin Luther King, Jr., hooks writes that:

[He] believed that love is ‘ultimately the only answer’ to the problems facing this nation and the entire planet. I share that belief and the conviction that it is in choosing love, and beginning with love as the ethical foundation for politics, that we are best positioned to transform society in ways that enhance the collective good. (1994: 294)

So what is so special about love? Why does she seem to think that it must serve as the foundation for our political efforts against domination? hooks’ later book *All About Love* offers a more lengthy meditation on love, but does not elaborate on its liberatory aspects explicitly. We are left to draw the bits and pieces scattered about her writings together in order to fully articulate hooks’ understanding of love, liberation, and their interrelation. In this essay, I will bring together some of hooks’ most important writings on love in order to clarify her account of the relationship between love and liberation. The focus of this exploration of hooks’ thinking on these subjects will be limited to a largely theoretical level, both in the interests of brevity, and because I believe that, if we are to take seriously hooks’ insights here, the elaboration of the more practical details must be undertaken in and through a “beloved community.”

Of course, while the appeal to love as a liberatory or emancipatory force may be quite novel with respect to contemporary political theory, within a more religious framework, the emphasis on love is hardly new. Hobbes, Locke, Marx, and Rawls may have had very little to say about love, but Christianity, on the other hand, has, at least in some of its manifestations, placed love front and center not only in its general *ethos*, but even in its politics. Given hooks’ own espousal of Christianity and her explicit reference to the Reverend King, it is clear that she is situating herself within the tradition of prophetic Christianity and its appeals to an ethos of love rooted in the gospels. Two significant questions emerge from this fact that need to be addressed before moving on to flesh out her specific account of love: first, if the appeal to love as emancipatory is at least two thousand years old, yet has hardly enjoyed a successful track record, then surely it doesn’t really work, and perhaps the modern emphasis on self-interest is more sound; and second, how, if at all, is hooks’ own discussion of love distinct within this long tradition with which she is so clearly connected?

The first question is in many ways analogous to the common critique that socialism is a demonstrated historical failure, and—like that critique—suggests that love, as a socio-political practice, suffers from inherent weaknesses. In response to this question, it is important to remind ourselves, first and foremost, that, while love may be a central theme in the Christian gospels, the formal institutions of Christianity—in particular those most responsible for shaping the political landscape of the modern world—did not entirely live up to the ideals of neighborly love described in those foundational texts. Just as the proponent of socialism may reasonably argue that historically “socialist” regimes are better exemplars of crass opportunism and the exploitation of perfectly good ideals for dubious ends than they are demonstrations of actual socialism in practice, one may well argue that the ethics and the politics of love has yet to be attempted on a large scale, and so rumors of its demonstrated failure have been greatly exaggerated. Love, in short, has yet to be given its full due.

Yet even if the historical record of the practice of love were conclusively dire, hooks is not simply offering a warmed over rehash of traditional Christian love. To be sure, she clearly has roots in and respect for that tradition, but what makes hooks’ discussion of love so interesting and compelling is in large part the way that it transcends the strictly theological, and offers what is ultimately a kind of conceptual analysis of love. Her account is, in other words, as much philosophical as it is theological, and that is the principal way in which her discussion of love is distinct. It is indebted to theological appeals to love, but ultimately offers an account of the nature and power of love that stands independent of any particular spiritual tradition. hooks is trying, in other words, to be respectful of the Christian tradition of love without being bound by it, and in that sense her work offers an important and distinct contribution to a theoretical account of love that deserves philosophical attention.

hooks begins “Love as the Practice of Freedom” by pointing to a problem arising from our “blind spots” when we confront systems of domination. Many of us who claim to be engaging in acts of resistance to domination, she tells us, are ultimately motivated by self-interest, and the desire “simply for an end to what we feel is hurting us” (hooks, 1994: 290). Thus, we focus on one aspect of domination (the one that most directly impacts us), and either ignore altogether, or offer only lip-service to the ways in which different kinds of domination are linked *systematically* to each other. hooks herself uses the examples of black male leaders who focus on racist domination while ignoring or even actively promoting sexist forms of oppression, or white feminist women who fail to address racism and white supremacy not only in the world around

them, but even within their own political movement. When we are motivated strictly by a desire to end our own suffering, then these *other* kinds of domination, when they are invoked at all, are understood at best as a kind of subordinate but related harm, and at worst as a distraction from the *real* work of ending whatever it is that is harming *me*. The problem should be familiar to any of us who have taken up this sort of political work. Those who struggle against class oppression, or racism, or sexism, may all too often have these “blind spots” when it comes to forms of domination outside of their specific purview.

The proper response to these blind spots, hooks tells us, is to alter our motivation away from the alleviation of our own suffering, and toward the care and concern for others. Our concern and attention must be expanded from a narrow focus on our own interests to include others more directly. “A love ethic”, she tells us, “makes this expansion possible” (hooks, 1994: 290). The Civil Rights Movement, as epitomized by Dr. King, made this love ethic explicit, but was limited by its focus on reform. The Black Power Movement made the positive shift from reform to revolution, but also shifted from an ethic of love to an emphasis on power (hooks, 1994: 291). What is needed, then, is political movement that is revolutionary in its vision of creating a new world, yet is motivated by and directed toward an ethic of love, as opposed to power or self-interest.

I offer the foregoing brief account by way of laying out the general claims hooks makes regarding love and liberation. The obvious question to which I must turn at this point is what, exactly, hooks means by love. A precise definition may not be entirely appropriate (if even possible), but some relatively complete and substantive account must be offered. *All About Love* draws upon the work of M. Scott Peck to describe love broadly as “the will to extend one’s self for the purpose of nurturing one’s own or another’s spiritual growth” (hooks, 2000: 4). According to hooks, the “spiritual” in this context refers to “an animating principle in the self—a life force (some of us call it soul) that when nurtured enhances our capacity to be more fully self-actualized and able to engage in communion with the world around us” (2000: 13). While hooks’ account of love offered in this book takes Peck’s definition as its starting point, she develops it in a direction that places central emphasis on the idea that love is a *practice* or activity, and not simply a *feeling* that we experience passively. This emphasis runs directly counter to most mainstream conceptions of love, and has crucial implications for her account of love’s role in liberation.

In popular consciousness, love tends to be conceived of as involuntary. It is a kind of potent and unpredictable psychic force which, for better or for worse, simply happens to us. It may be a kind of magical gift, or a horrible curse, but either way, we have no control over it. We “fall” into it, we are “struck” or “snared” by it. It makes us sick and/or crazy, binding us with compulsions that might never occur to us if we were not so lovesick. hooks rejects this conception, however, as contrary to her understanding of love as the nurturing of spiritual growth (2000: 5). Nurturing, because it requires sustained commitment and ongoing engagement, is not something that simply happens to one. Whether nurturing house plants, or cats, or children, we must continually return to and affirm our ongoing commitment to the practice of nurturing. Thus, love, as a kind of nurturing of spiritual growth, likewise requires an ongoing practice, and thus cannot be properly understood as an instinctual, overwhelming force or condition that just happens to befall us.

This means, for hooks, that love is not reducible to care, and it is certainly not simply about lust or desire. “Care,” she tells us, “is a dimension of love, but simply giving care does not mean we are loving” (hooks, 2000: 8). As a manifestation of nurturing, love entails “various ingredients—care, affection, recognition, respect, commitment, and trust, as well as honest and open communication” (hooks, 2000: 5). Commitment, trust, respect, recognition and communication are all phenomena requiring the engagement of will and choice on the part of the agent, and insofar as hooks’ account of love entails these aspects, it must be essentially deliberate. As a practice of nurturing, love requires the continued commitment to the growth and well being of the beloved, and so the practice of love cannot be understood as something that happens to or befalls the one who loves.

As a deliberate practice, furthermore, love is something for which we must take responsibility. According to hooks: “To begin by always thinking of love as an action rather than a feeling is one way in which anyone using the word in this manner automatically assumes accountability and responsibility” (2000: 13). If love is not something that simply happens to or befalls us, then we must hold ourselves accountable for the ways in which we are loving poorly. One of the strengths of hooks’ work is her unflinching willingness to take herself to task for her own failures to love well. We must hold ourselves and others responsible for the ways we have related to others, and especially those central relationships of family and life-partners. “Abuse and neglect negate love,” hooks tells us, and so her examples of her neglectful parents, and her abusive partners are employed to illustrate what can at best be described as care or affection mas-

querading as love (2000: 22). Of course, responsibility is not merely directed toward the past, but must also inform our approach to the future. Holding herself and others responsible for failures to love, hooks commits herself to an “awakening to love” (2000: 83) and the affirmation of “a love ethic” (2000: 87). The emphasis on accountability and responsibility, in other words, is not about blame, criticism, and guilt, but about opening the space for orienting oneself toward the practice of love.

The “love ethic” at the heart of the practice of love involves the demand that we be truthful with ourselves and others (hooks, 2000: 48). Her emphasis on commitment, recognition, respect, trust, and communication all point to this need for truthfulness. While good communication and truthfulness are often understood as linked, hooks’ insight is to point out how truthfulness is also intimately tied to recognition, respect, and trust. We must take up the challenge of coming to know those we love both as they are now, and as they have it in them to become. This is the essence of nurturing—to affirm and facilitate growth toward a possibility of flourishing that is only latent in the here and now. Of course, love as nurturing cannot be simply the imposition of my own vision of the future upon the beloved. One needs also to listen to others, and be open to criticism and correction in one’s understanding not only of the beloved, but of oneself.

This communicative aspect of love clearly informs hooks’ association of love with “education for critical consciousness” (1994: 295). We must understand that for hooks, education is not simply about the accumulation of information, but is, like love, an ongoing practice of bettering oneself and others. The *critical* aspect of the practice of education is paramount here. Not in the sense of “being critical” of oneself or others, but in the sense of “learning to look both inward and outward with a critical eye” (1994: 295). In other words, we must be engaged in the ongoing effort to locate and address weaknesses in our own understanding of ourselves and the world around us, while fostering that ongoing effort in others. “Awareness,” hooks tells us, “is central to the process of love as the practice of freedom” (1994: 295). For example, if I find a blind spot or shortcoming within myself, I must have the courage, I must love myself enough, to work to overcome it. For those who are members of exploited or oppressed groups, this means taking up the project of mental decolonization—of confronting internalized racism and sexism, self-hatred, guilt, and despair. For those who are members of dominant groups, this means turning an unblinking eye toward our own beliefs and practices so that we can recognize and acknowledge when we have failed to live up to the ideals we espouse. Since many people can occupy both of these positions at once, or in different ways at different times and places, part of this education for critical con-

sciousness can involve learning to understand our roles as both dominator and dominated throughout the course of our lives. Similarly, we must be willing to confront the shortcomings and weaknesses within our communities. If self-love motivates me toward critical self-scrutiny, so does my love for my community lead me to critical appraisal of others. hooks' main point is that if we understand oppression and domination as a kind of harm, then healing requires a careful and clear diagnosis. She sums this point up as follows: "Acknowledging the truth of our reality, both individual and collective, is a necessary stage for personal and political growth" (hooks, 1994: 295).

Of course, this kind of critical endeavor can often be quite painful. Fortunately, as hooks tells us, in "choosing love we also choose to live in community, and that means that we do not have to change by ourselves" (1994: 296). This process of critical education, this nurturing of spiritual growth, is always undertaken with others, who not only help me with the critical practice, but also support me through the more difficult aspects of that task. In loving others, according to hooks, we seek *service*. Not the kind of service that can be bought or sold, as in the "service industry", but the kind of service where I take the needs and interests of another seriously, and seek to further those needs and interests. I cannot, if I am to *serve* another in this way, reduce them to an object, but must be mindful of their status as a subject like me. Service of this sort is often denigrated in our society, but for hooks, it is in part through serving others that we learn to love.

It is important to note that there is a kind of reciprocity here that characterizes the whole of hooks' discussion of love. On one level, there is the cause and effect relation of love and service. I serve because I love, and in serving, I learn to love better, which enables me to serve better, and so on. On another level, through my service, I learn that, to the extent that I, too, am loved by you, you will not want to see me reduced to an object and dominated through my service. In other words, genuine service not only demands that I acknowledge and respect your subject-hood in serving you, but that my own subject-hood is made even more clear to me in the way that you, in loving me back, honor and serve me. We each come to give our subject-hood to the other reciprocally, and so have our own subject-hood given back to us in a more fully-realized way. All of this furthers our education for critical consciousness, as well, for in serving each other, we come to learn more not only about the other, but also about ourselves.

hooks is clear, however, that the reciprocity of love is not properly understood as modeled on economic relations of exchange. The love offered here is not a trade, nor is it motivated through self-interest (no matter how "enlightened") such that I love in

order to be loved in return. Likewise, the service rendered is not offered as a tool for barter, but is rather, as part of the practice of love, directed toward the nurturing of the spiritual growth of the beloved. Of course, the proper nurturing of another demands that “critical consciousness” (the self-critical attitude) so central to hooks’ understanding of love as a practice, and thus loving another requires the development of self-love (2000: 54). At the same time, since the practice of love is always undergone in a community, self-love cannot be undertaken alone, but requires loving relationships with others. Ultimately, therefore, to love another requires the loving of oneself, and to cultivate the love of oneself, one must take up the practice of love directed toward others. Furthermore, being loved—being nurtured in one’s spiritual growth—brings with it an imperative, if that growth is actually taking place, to practice love in return. In short, the practice of love, for hooks, is a practice of reciprocity all the way down.

There are two last points that need to be stressed here. The first has to do with the nature of the community we seek when we take up hooks’ ethic of love. It is not enough to simply assert our love for humanity in some empty, abstract fashion. We don’t love abstractions, we love *people*, and people are always particular. In *Killing Rage*, hooks follows Martin Luther King in referring to the kind of community to which she is appealing here as a “beloved community” that *affirms* differences (1995: 272). The aim, in other words, is not some monolithic amalgam where all difference is set aside—we seek not uniformity, but harmony. This is true both in the sense that we maintain, and even strengthen, our bonds to our cultural and familial origins, and in the sense that we work with others in a way that does not demand a mutual surrender to some universal norm or standard. The ideal of the beloved community does not demand that we take up our role in the community purged of all of our cultural and historical particularity. Nor does it insist that we sweep our real differences and disagreements under the proverbial rug. As hooks observes, “as long as our society holds up a vision of democracy that requires the surrender of bonds and ties to legacies folks hold dear, challenging racism and white supremacy will seem like an action that diminishes and destabilizes” (1995: 265). This attention to and affirmation of difference and particularity is central to the notion of love to which hooks is appealing. If I love someone, I do not love her only if she conducts herself according to my exacting standards and conforms to my idea of who she ought to be. And if I am loved, it is not as some empty abstraction or placeholder, but as me—including all the things that make me *this person*, as opposed to just *a person*. The test of the strength of any community is its capacity to withstand difference and discord. The musical metaphor of harmony can be illuminating here. Harmony, in the musical context, just is the

fitting together of different sounds, and when there is discord or disharmony, the task of the musician is not to make all the sounds the same (such that there is only one effective note), but rather to generate a “sympathetic” relation between the different sounds. The beloved community, likewise, will celebrate hybridity and difference, not attempt to ignore or eliminate it.

The last point that needs to be stressed is implicit in the very title of hooks’ chapter on love in *Outlaw Culture*: “Love as the Practice of Freedom.” Love, for hooks, is not a necessary condition for the achievement of freedom as some state of being. Rather, Love is the practice of freedom. Both love and freedom are dynamic processes, not static states of being. When we come to love someone, it is not some set condition that suddenly obtains, and at which point we can say: “A-ha! *Now* I am in love.” My being in love is not a state that I obtain so much as a process, or perhaps even better, a project, that I take up. It is an activity that one may manifest, rather than a property that one possesses—a thing that one gives or receives. More importantly, once undertaken, this practice of love only lasts so long as we nurture it—that is, we are in love so long as our love continues to thrive and grow. We must seek to better know each other, to deepen our mutual understanding, and increase the intimacy of our connection. Love as a practice, therefore, never truly ends. If it is about nurturing, and nurturing is about spiritual growth and flourishing, and growth and flourishing entail change and ongoing development, then love always needs to be pushing itself to new heights. The end of growth and positive development, in other words, is the end of love—stasis is death.

At this point, it is possible to shed some light on hooks’ understanding of the connection between love and liberation. Freedom, hooks is asserting, is a practice, like love. They are indeed so intimately connected that love just *is* the practice of freedom. This means first that we should not think of freedom as some static condition that we reach or obtain, but rather as a process or project that we take up, and that project, for hooks, is precisely the project of working together toward a society that has less and less oppression and domination. Liberation, in other words, is not a state one achieves, but an activity one manifests. Spiritual growth and development is linked by hooks to “our capacity to be more fully self-actualized and able to engage in communion with the world around us” (2000: 13).

It is because hooks understands freedom as itself a practice directed toward nurturing that she understands love to be so central to it. The systems of domination, exploitation, and oppression that we face are therefore fundamentally anti-love every

bit as much as they are anti-freedom. If we are to free ourselves, we must work together to free each other, because it is in this shared service that we find our freedom. At the same time, shared service is a clear manifestation of love, as hooks understands it, and the working together for freedom is itself a kind of nurturing of spiritual growth. As she puts it: "A love ethic presupposes that everyone has the right to be free, to live fully and well" (hooks, 2000: 87). If we are to work together in this way, we must approach each other in the spirit of love. In this way, the practice of love *is* the practice of freedom, and any project of liberation undertaken outside of a love ethic, according to hooks, is doomed to failure.

References

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Notes

This argument is central, for example, to Iris Young's *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (1990).