bell hooks, Black Feminist Thought, and Black Buddhism: A Tribute

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This tribute to the late bell hooks examines her work as a Black feminist and Black Buddhist. After a brief introduction to her life, I examine her contributions to feminist thought, particularly her understanding of the need to dismantle "imperial white supremacist capitalist patriarchy." As a Black feminist and woman, hooks comes to this work, first, with rage, but in her turn to Buddhist thought, she develops a love ethic, one that she wrote extensively about until her death in 2021 of renal failure.

Key words:
bell hooks/Gloria Jean Watkins; imperial white supremacist capitalist patriarchy; Black Buddhism; Buddhist-Christian; Jack Kerouac; Thich Nhat Hanh; rage; love ethic

bell hooks, Gloria Jean Watkins, was born in Hopkinsville, Kentucky in 1952 and died on December 15, 2021, of end-stage renal failure (Yancy 2022).1 Her pen name, bell hooks, was a tribute to her great-grandmother, Bell Blair Hooks. She did not capitalize her name, so as to put her person in the shadow of her writing, of her ideas on race, class, and gender, on teaching, on love (Quintana 2010).2 Indeed, her intellectual production remained front and center, as she also refused to use conventional citation practices. She was a prolific writer, publishing forty books and many articles. hooks is a foundational voice in Black feminism and in literary and cultural criticism. She was one of the first generation of Black Buddhists, along with Jan Willis, Ralph Steele, Charles Johnson, and others.3

hooks studied literature at Stanford University and completed her doctorate at the University of California, Santa Cruz in 1983. She taught in many distinguished institutions, finishing her career at Berea College in Kentucky, home of the hooks Institute and the bell hooks Center, which the college webpage describes as a place where "historically underrepresented students can come to be as they are, outside of the social scripts that circumscribe their living."4 "Underrepresented" included, for hooks, Appalachian students. She was the original Affrilachian, black Appalachian, thinker—and poet, as I will discuss at the end of this tribute—whose work changed the practices of the academy in crucial ways. Here, I would like to honor hooks, thinking about her Black feminist struggle against imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy and its impact on our lives, particularly Black lives, her Buddhist-Christian identity, her movement through rage to love, her transformative insights on teaching, and, finally, her work as a poet.

hooks embraced feminism and Buddhism as a young student at Stanford University. As a Black feminist, hooks' framework addresses the struggle against "imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy" and its impact on society, particularly for Black people, for whose wounding it refuses to account; imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy will do anything to anyone to maintain itself (hooks 1995).5 White supremacy, she argues, is pathological, "a serious and profound mental illness [that] leads people to do completely and utterly insane things," leading to a spiritual as well as political crisis (Yancy and hooks 2015).6 For hooks, as a Buddhist, this normalizes mental

illness and violence, and imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy has wounded Black people in particular ways, hooks asserts, engendering rage.

hooks remained a Black feminist because, for her, feminism was the first discipline in which race and self had to be interrogated. She told George Yancy that when Black women began to address feminism, white feminists had to "open their minds and change the whole direction of feminist thought, writing, and action" to address race (Yancy and hooks 2015). But, she tells Yancy, feminism does not ground her; her spiritual practice, grounded in Christianity and influenced by the emphasis on practice in Buddhism, does. john a. powell says that she called herself a "Buddhist Christian" (powell 2022).7 Both feminism and Buddhism "empowered" hooks "to work with alternative frameworks" that resist surrender or cooperation with, and that generate innovative responses to, the violent workings of normative patriarchal structures. One path, she writes, "was leading me in the direction of self-actualization, the other journey was leading me away from all notions of self" (hooks 2008),8 each reinforcing the other.

Like many Black Buddhists of her generation, hooks has described herself as not being seen as a "real" Buddhist: "no long time with a teacher, no journey to India or Tibet, never present at important retreats" (powell 2022). She writes that suffering led her to Buddhism (hooks 2008: 34). She became interested in Buddhism when, at eighteen, she met Gary Snyder—indeed, he, Jack Kerouac, and the Beats were her introduction to Buddhism, and because of Snyder, poetry, which combined creative process and spiritual practice, became an important form for hooks. Snyder became a mentor for the young poet, inviting her to his home. There, she met Buddhist women walking the bodhisattva path. Feminism and Buddhism together, she suggests, with Rita Gross, help us to imagine a Buddhism beyond patriarchy (hooks 2008: 36–7). Buddhism changes women, she suggests, bringing "a centeredness, strength, and power of being" (Gregory and Mrozik 2008: 71).9 Then, women change Buddhism and society.

Kerouac, particularly, influenced the shape of her Buddhist-Christian identity. His thought allowed her to combine a "transgressive spirit" with "the traditional church" where "Beat" meant "'beatific.'"10 hooks writes:

> I follow the path Kerouac helped forge as I work to mesh intense Christian upbringing with Buddhist thought. In the

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late sixties he continued to work through the convergences between these two spiritual paths, juxtaposing Christian with Buddhist writing. Starting with the assumption that "words come from the holy ghost" Kerouac reminds readers that "Mozart and Blake often felt they weren't pushing their own pens, 'twas the 'Muse' singing and pushing." (hooks 2020)

hooks also says that the conversations between Thich Nhat Hanh and Daniel Berrigan in The Raft is Not the Shore gave her a way to talk within Christianity about Buddhism (hooks, Gregory, and Mrozik 2008: 83).11 Meeting Thich Nhat Hanh influenced her thought deeply, because his "Buddhism isn't framed from a location of privilege, but from a location of deep anguish—the anguish of a people being destroyed in a genocidal war" (hooks 2022).12 Yet she argues that love was not emphasized in Buddhism when she encountered it. She credits Thich Nhat Hanh, Sharon Salzburg, and the Dalai Lama with addressing love in Buddhism. Thich Nhat Hanh also personally told her that she could hold onto her anger "and use it as compost for [her] garden" and to cultivate the seeds planted in a tumultuous relationship as a practice "to find in the mind of love a way to understanding, forgiveness, and peace" (hooks 2014).13 The metaphor of gardening, for hooks, indicates the hard work in coming to love, in taking action to move through rage, "just as cultivating a garden requires turning over the ground, pulling weeds, planting and watering" (hooks 2014).

hooks moves through rage to love. Here, I want to discuss her work in Killing Rage: Ending Racism as a representative work, because it shows her movement from a rage that makes her want to kill to the capacity to "kill" rage and use anger as a skillful means (bell hooks 1995). Here, hooks analyzes the white gaze and its terroristic impact on Black people and how the imagination of whiteness, for Black people, engenders a terror that leads to shame, which limits agency and leads to mental illness and addiction (hooks 1995: 61, 135). hooks, who grew up in a segregated Black community, asserts that, since integration, Black people moved from loving blackness to responding to whiteness, thereby rooting Blackness in participation in white supremacy (hooks 1995: 243). In her Buddhist analysis, she argues that "one of the things that white people gave us when they gave us integration was full access to the tormenting reality of desire, and the expectation of constant consumption" (Yancy and hooks 2015).. Buying into this way of living separates us, blocking, she argues, the capacity to build coalitions and form "black cultural democracy," which involves not one essential and monolithic Black identity, but the engagement of multiple Black subjectivities (hooks 1995: 247–8), which are needed to address multiple challenges. hooks, through Buddhist thought, warns us about clinging to the idea of any unitary identity. Such clinging creates a stasis that, in Black life and, I would argue, in any life, can be coopted by nationalism, leading to separatism and violence. Breaking the attachment to a unitary, fixed self opens us to process and to fluidity, opening Black people again, for hooks, to Black self-love, which should undergird any radical political agenda.

hooks, in Killing Rage, recognizes that rage can be, as the Buddha knew, a sign that something needs to be addressed: we all feel anger, but we must be conscious, mindful, to avoid moving to hatred. The Dalai Lama, for example, tells us that "hatred and attachment, desire, are the two 'cronies' of ignorance" (Dalai Lama 1997: 26).14 Anger may be a skillful means, but we must be careful that we are clear about how we use it, not deploying a false clarity that may allow us to make an enemy of the "other" and to reject the teaching power of the present moment.15 We may believe we are awake but, actually, we may be bringing more suffering to ourselves and others. We must be careful of anger, because "anger has a hook": "it feels good" (Dalai Lama 1997: 23). And it can lead us from community into exile.

Love leads back to community. One issue hooks addressed many times is Black male identity and its cooperation with patriarchy. Policing Black womanhood is central to imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy, which sees Black women's struggles for self-determination as a threat (hooks 1995: 88). hooks said that she knew as a young woman that Black men participate in patriarchy. In Killing Rage, she critiques black male culture for buying into its pieces of patriarchy—for example, in asserting that the suffering of Black males is greater than that of Black women. Black men use their marginal participation in patriarchy to "deflect attention away from the power and privileges accorded them by maleness"; the problem, hooks writes, is not always only racism (hooks 1995: 86–7). In this vein, she also critiques the patriarchal family structure, arguing that the reliance on a single, male authority figure—in the home and in politics as well—is dangerous because it creates a climate of autocracy where the politics of coercion, including violence, are used to maintain that authority (hooks 1995: 68). The equation that Black liberation is only black manhood condones sexism, she writes, and, quoting Paul Gilroy, also condones an exaggerated masculinity that operates as Black men subordinate Black women. Yet, at the same time, this participation in patriarchy is immensely damaging to Black men, who endure the "worst impositions of gendered masculine patriarchal identity," being seen "in the image of the brute—untamed, uncivilized, unthinking, and unfeeling" (hooks 2004a: xii).16 The image of "family" that emerges from this is damaging. Since patriarchy is about domination, not love, families in patriarchy are not safe places (hooks 1995: 73).

For hooks, transformation of the family is one place that we, as Pema Chodron writes, can start where we are. Quoting Mary McLeod Bethune (1875–1955), who was a Black educator and the founder of the National Council of Negro Women, hooks says:

> Let's just start the college in your living room. Self-determination really does begin at home. We're finding out that one of the reasons for why so much black rebel anti-racist movements failed is because they didn't take care of the home as a site of resistance. (Yancy and hooks 2015)

Home, she says is a "place of spiritual possibility […] a holy place," because, I think, it is in the homeplace that Black people can risk intimacy and create modes of healing that, hooks argues, are not readily available to Black people in public spaces because, hooks asserts, very few people feel Black people deserve healing (Yancy and hooks 2015). At home, in the homeplace, a foundational space of communion (powell 2022) and love, resistance, and healing can begin (hooks 2015).17
When hooks turned to love as an antidote to rage and reshaped anger as a skillful means that recognizes inequality and resists domination, the primary work of imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy, her Buddhist practice is the source. She writes many volumes on this work. She examines Black men and patriarchy in The Will to Change: Men, Masculinity, and Love (hooks 2004b),18 but her "Love Song to the Nation" series addresses all of us in All About Love: New Visions, in which she examines multiple forms of love, Salvation: Black People and Love,19 and Communion: The Female Search for Love.20
Love, for her, is not only a feeling. It is, primarily, an art and a practice, particularly of freedom, with self-love as a basis (hooks 2000: 88).21 It is a voluntary practice that involves accountability and responsibility, as well as "all the dimensions of love—'care, commitment, trust, responsibility, respect, and knowledge'" (hooks 2000: 94). Anger in her practice is righteous anger against injustice, used as a skillful means. As an African American facing micro- and macro-aggressions, anger is part of life, and like Pema Chodron, she argues we must start where we are, beginning with acceptance—even of our anger—and become mindful.

> Fundamentally, to begin the practice of love, we must slow down and be still enough to bear witness in the present moment. If we accept that love is a combination of care, commitment, knowledge, responsibility, respect, and trust, we can then be guided by this understanding. We can use these skillful means as a map in our daily life to determine right action. When we cultivate the mind of love, we are, as Sharon Salzberg says, "cultivating the good," and that means "recovering the incandescent power of love that is present as a potential in all of us" and using "the tools of spiritual practice to sustain our real, moment-to-moment experience of that vision." (hooks 2000: 94)

Love is important for effective political action because it is the foundation of a Beloved Community. Like many Black Buddhists, hooks connects Buddhism's non-violence, using the work of thinkers like Chögyam Trumgpa Rimpoche and Thich Nhat Hanh in his Engaged Buddhism, to Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Civil Rights Movement. Though she recognizes that the Movement did not always meet the needs of black women and tried to keep women in a subservient role (see: hooks 1981: 5– 6),22 she counts King among her visionary teachers who see love as a "transformative power" (hooks 2021). She told George Yancy that, living in a small white town in the Bible Belt, she thinks, "'What does Martin Luther King want me to do today?' Then I decide what Martin Luther King wants me to do today is to go out into the world and in every way that I can, large and small, build a beloved community" (Yancy and hooks 2015). Sharon Salzberg's book Lovingkindness informs hooks' understanding of metta: "In cultivating love, we remember one

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of the most powerful truths the Buddha taught [...] that the forces in the mind that bring suffering are able to temporarily hold down the positive forces such as love or wisdom, but they can never destroy them." Love is the greater power and nothing "can obstruct it" (hooks 2021). Love, therefore, is the soul force, as Gandhi understood it, that can work against oppression, domination, and exploitation; "'war, poverty, economic injustice, [and] ecological degradation.'" In starting where we are, our wounds are, our suffering is, where we begin this work (hooks 2021).23
hooks' love ethic has been more influential, I think, than has been acknowledged. For example, Jennifer Nash, in Black Feminism Reimagined: After Intersectionality, albeit from a different origin point— for her, law—calls for a love ethic (Nash 2019).24 Naomi Joy Godden, in "The Love Ethic: A Radical Theory for Social Work Practice," directly cites hooks' work (Godden 2017).25 I also see hooks' work on love influencing the emerging conversations on care, since hooks argues, in All About Love, that care is not necessarily loving. Other feminist thought is often used in discussions on a love ethic and on care,26 yet I would argue that hooks' thought has travelled without being named, which is part of her commitment to an intellectual life in which the ideas are more important than the scholar—to her sense, as we will see, of kenosis and no-self. This ethic, even before the books on love, was the foundation of hooks' teaching, which is a practice in which hooks' love ethic always was enacted.

Teaching to Transgress

Her friends tell us that bell hooks loved and respected children (Karlyn Crowley in Yancy 2022). She wrote numerous children's books, including Nappy to Be Happy and Homemade Love (hooks 2002, 1999).27 I see these books as part of her commitment to education—to what it means to teach as a loving and transformative practice. She believed, as she told George Yancy, that "Most children are amazing critical thinkers before we silence them" (Yancy and hooks 2015). Breaking that silence, reversing that damage, is what, for hooks, teaching is. It is a practice in which a "democratic educator" embodies and combines an ethic of love, care, commitment to service, and accountability; knowledge, responsibility, and respect—all of which make the classroom a civil space in which we may trust in order to create hope in the capacity for human beings to change (hooks 2003: 73).28

Her Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom (1994) has influenced many generations of teachers, and it transformed my generation of teachers, changing how we define our purposes and work in the classroom. hooks emphasizes critical thinking as a path to community, through the guiding presence of the teacher who is both catalyst and companion. She argued that critical thinking is not just criticism; it is a form of care: if our thinking does not care about the human person, society, and social ills, it is dangerous. The teacher's work, therefore, is to guide students through the tensions that may emerge in the classroom towards commitment (hooks 1994: 40).29 This is consistent with her admiration of the work of Martin Luther King, Jr., who believed that revealing cleavages in society was necessary work for making social change.30 She argued that her work, including her theory of education, emerged organically as she sought "an oppositional standpoint that would help me survive a painful childhood" (hooks and West 1991: 148).31 At the same time, her segregated education assumed that Black children would become agents of change, nurturing the life of the mind as a "counter-hegemonic act, a fundamental way to resist every strategy of white racist colonization" (hooks 1994: 2). Theory, the experience of critical thinking, of reflections and analysis, is instantiated in practice that imagines and acts to make real "possible futures [...] where life could be lived differently" (hooks 1994: 61).32 She argues, in "Moving Beyond Gender," that this is what the Buddhist concept of the Middle Way or Path offers:

> Seeing reality in this way we are able to hold one another accountable for the positions we occupy in dominator culture without evoking a politics of blame or victimhood. An authentic middle way allows us to recognize multiple intentionalities. We can easily move past either/or notions to both/and. To me, the middle way is the space of radical openness, the space that invites true communication. (hooks 2008: 38–9).

This commitment to radical openness emerges from hooks' sense of identity and reflects her Buddhist-Christian practice. Leah Kalmanson argues that hooks refuses to cast identity, particularly besieged Black identity, in dialectical terms: "She envisions black identity occupying a stance of critical resistance that is oppositional without being merely reactionary, and she describes this creative sense of oppositionality in aesthetic terms" (Kalmanson 2012: 812).33 Kalmanson sees hooks' walking the middle way as a skillful deployment of the Buddhist doctrine of no-self (hooks 1994: 8). Artistry in everyday life provides a foundation for a vision of radical subjectivity; for hooks, it is a foundation for deploying a subjective multiplicity and engendering a capacity for change (Kalmanson 2012: 818). In addition, it resists, in a feminist-Buddhist way, Kalmanson argues, dividing the political, the personal, and the interpersonal, and the strength of this identity is that it can face change, endure loss, and mourn (Kalmanson 2012: 825). In the classroom, this means being interested in one another, hearing each other's voices, and recognizing one another's presences (hooks 1994: 8), even as our dearly held epistemes, our sense of why we think the world has to be as it is, may be questioned and undone.
I saw a striking resemblance between Kalmanson's argument on hooks' deployment of no-self and George Yancy's recognition that hooks, from not capitalizing her name to her understanding of the work of love, cultivated no-self in her life. Yancy writes, "embedded within her writings, with her discussions, within the arc of her existence" is kenosis, self-emptying. In Buddhist-Christian terms, kenosis is no-self. Yancy writes:

> The term clearly resonates with bell's Buddhist Christian sensibilities as it speaks to a form of dying to aspects of the self that sustain violence and forms of toxic divisiveness. Dying, within this context, though, speaks to radical transformation, generative opening, self-forgiveness, and the forgiveness of others, a powerful sense of letting go. (Yancy 2022)

This leads, Yancy argues, to the "liberated voice" and connects it to hooks' transgressive teaching, her use of Paulo Freire's criticism of the banking method of education (Yancy 2022), which is an anti- assembly line. Instead, hooks encourages an approach that includes the sharing of stories (hooks 1994: 13), thereby integrating reflection, (inter-) disciplinary knowledge, and praxis towards transformation. Reading and thinking together under the care of a loving teacher are transformational and liberating acts that make futures possible. Joyce Yukawa suggests that the banking method cannot address "wicked questions" (Yukawa 2015).34 I suggest that hooks asked "wicked questions, and her critical pedagogy/thinking/practice travelled out of the classroom to address wicked problems" (Medine 2019: 329).
hooks' love ethic brings together the moving pieces of her intellectual life: her struggle against imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchal culture, her love of her people, her devotion to teaching, and her love of the beautiful. All this comes together in her writing as a spiritual practice, which she prefaces with prayer and meditation. Her writing, she says in "Voices and Visions," when infused with spirit, is "a moment of pure mystery" that, when complete, leads to "intense jubilation and ecstasy": "Writing becomes then a way to embrace the mysterious, to walk with spirits, and an entry into the realm of the sacred" (hooks 2020). This creates a context of healing, filled with love. Love, as she told George Yancy, is "the only way out of domination" and the only way to connect with others, and to know how to be as a human being is to participate in "every aspect of your life as a sacrament of love" (Yancy and hooks 2015).
Her writing was a loving practice of opening spaces for hope. She hoped, in her college education, to become a "thinking artist," and art was, for her, throughout her life, related to the experience of the power of the imagination. It was, she says, "the imagination that fueled my hope as a young girl in a working-class Southern black home so that I would be able to create an artistic life for myself. The power of the imagination felt prophetic" (hooks 2003: 185). The artist lives out and embodies the dream of freedom and demonstrates, like the Buddha, how to do it.

I wanted to close this tribute to bell hooks with her poetry because that is where her contact with Buddhism began. Her Buddhist Christian/Buddhist feminist practice through poetry is, as she writes in "Poem 34," "where we imagine/we hear clearly/destiny calling" (hooks 2012).35 In her volume, Appalachian Elegy: Poetry and Place, hooks writes that growing up in the Kentucky backwoods made her aware of the importance of being wild, which means freedom and self-determination (hooks 2012: 1–2). In these poems, hooks engages in lamentation, for a landscape affected by war and for all human conditions that keep us at war (hooks 2012: 7) with self and other. These poems also remember those who have been silenced and who might be forgotten (hooks 2012: 8). The Kentucky hills are a homeplace of memory, full of "organic monuments" on which one can stand to call the sacred: "rock on which to stand/and know divine presence/witness and testify" (hooks 2012: 49, poem #39). This wilderness—which is in the free self—is an "intense field of possibility" that is and embraces change. It offers "a constant passing/of life into death/and back again" (hooks 2012: 41; poem #31), an engagement in a dialectical movement avoiding extremes that is the Middle Way, "reaching past death" (hooks 2012: 49, #39).

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In “Poem 23,” my favorite of her poems, she brings Buddha “to rest home in Kentucky hills” (hooks 2012: 33, poem #23). When Buddha (not THE Buddha, but one with Buddha nature) rests at home, light shines, opening a way. Buddha calls:

> be balanced
> know lovingkindness
> end suffering. (hooks 2012: 33, poem #23)

How? The practice is to “rejoice in the oneness of life” and “then let go.” This is the Middle Way which avoids extremes: it is, I think, Buddhist renunciation and detachment, which in the Catholic Christian baptismal vow is also confirmation of taking up the way. The pilgrim travels light: “carry nothing on your back/travel empty.” This is to trust and to be unburdened, let go of dualism, of attachment, of self. Then, in place, the Kentucky hills, one journeys on, out of place: “as you climb steep mountain paths” (hooks 2012: 33, poem #23). There is no destination. Only movement—inner and outer. Only traveling into the wounded landscape of Kentucky, awake. Only travel, awake, into the heart.

I grieve the passing of bell hooks and celebrate her life, the seeds of which are planted in my life and the lives and works of so many others.

Eternal rest grant unto Sister bell, O Lord.
And let perpetual light shine upon her.
May she rest in peace.36

I am life without boundaries.
I have never been born,
And I have never died…
Since before time, I have been free. Birth and death are only doors through which we pass,
sacred thresholds on our journey…
We will meet again tomorrow.
We will meet at the source every moment.
We will meet each other in all forms of life.[37]

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