

BELL HOOKS

b. September 25, 1952

d. December 15, 2021

An influential author and feminist, hooks explored the intersection of race, class, gender and sexuality.

AUTHOR & FEMINIST

“I will not have my life narrowed down. I will not bow down ... to someone else’s ignorance.”

Bell Hooks was a Black feminist writer and social critic who helped pave the way for the study of intersectionality: how race, gender, class and sexuality form overlapping systems of discrimination. The author of 30 books, hooks is best known for her powerful critiques of patriarchy, sexism and racism.

Hooks, née Gloria Jean Watkins, was born in the small, segregated town of Hopkinsville, Kentucky, the daughter of a maid and a janitor. She attended public school and received a bachelor’s degree in English from Stanford University in 1973. She earned her master’s degree in English from the University of Wisconsin-Madison three years later.

Hooks taught English at the University of Southern California for three years. Around this time, she adopted the pen name bell hooks, after her maternal great-grandmother. She intentionally uncapitalized it to focus attention on her work, rather than herself.

In 1981, while studying for her doctorate in English at the University of California, Santa Cruz, hooks published her influential work “Ain’t I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism.” She finished her Ph.D. and, for the next decade, taught English and Afro-American Studies at various colleges universities. In 1984 she published “Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center,” a critique of racism in the white feminist community.

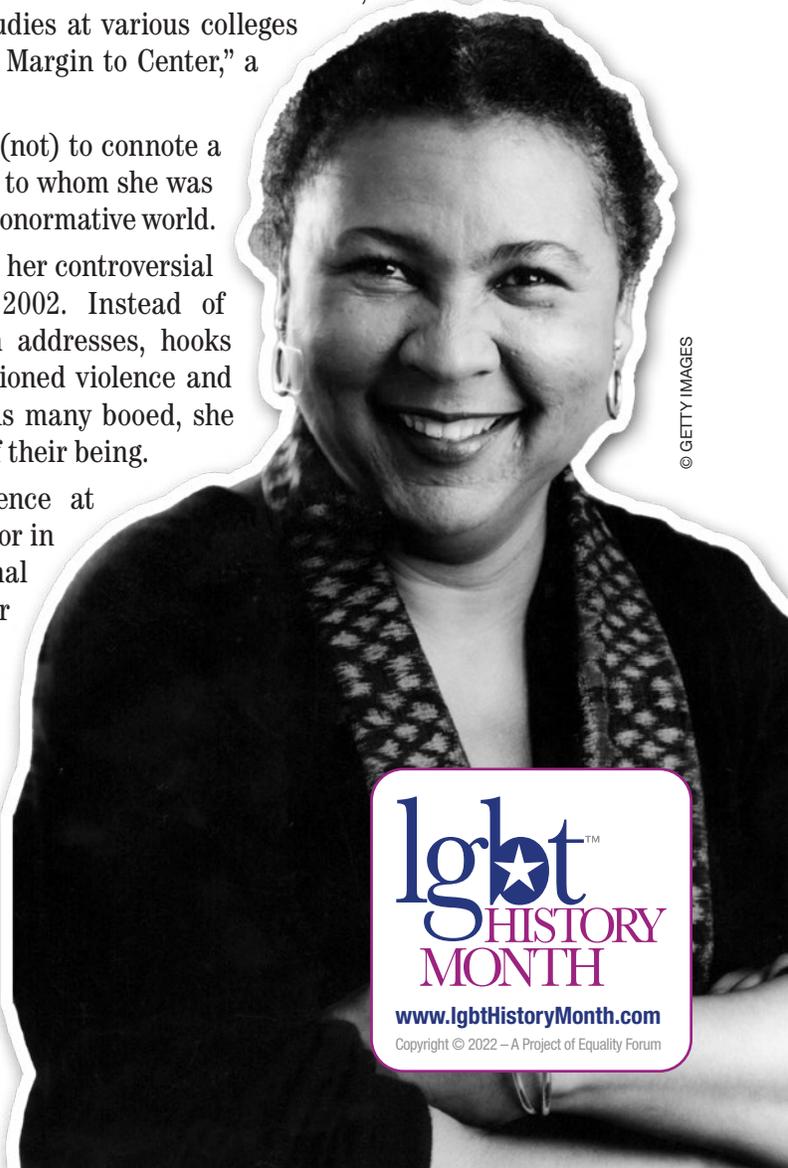
Hooks identified as “queer-pas-gay,” using the French “pas” (not) to connote a more unbound identity. She saw her queerness as less about to whom she was attracted and more about creating space for herself in a heteronormative world.

In addition to her large body of work, hooks is also known for her controversial commencement speech at Southwestern University in 2002. Instead of conforming with the traditional, optimistic spirit of such addresses, hooks used the occasion to condemn prejudice, government-sanctioned violence and oppression, and the pitfalls of capitalism and patriarchy. As many booed, she instructed the students to “realize the essential goodness” of their being.

During the 2000s, hooks served as a scholar in residence at The New School. In 2004 she became a distinguished professor in residence at Berea College, the first integrated co-educational college in the South. Berea established the bell hooks center in 2014.

Throughout her life, hooks received many nominations and awards, most notably The American Book Award from the Before Columbus Foundation (1991) and the Lila Wallace Reader’s Digest Writer’s Award (1994). The Atlantic Monthly called her “one of our nation’s leading public intellectuals.”

Hooks moved back to her home state in 2008. She was inducted into Kentucky’s Writers Hall of Fame in 2018. She died of kidney failure at age 69.



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