CLASSIC BOOK REVIEW

Something About Love

bell hooks (2001) All about Love: New Visions. New York: Perennial.
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Several years ago, when I first read bell hooks' book *All About Love,* then already a classic, it spoke to me in words which I had yearned to hear for years, or decades, really. It talked about how we are all wounded and vulnerable. It talked about how woundedness should not be a cause for shame, as it is necessary for our spiritual growth and awakening. It beautifully described how accepting our vulnerability and embracing our wounds instead of being ashamed of them can help us in processes of healing. When I feel hurt, sad or disempowered, I often return to this book again.

All About Love is, however, much more than a book about personal traumas and individual processes of healing. It is a book that conceptualizes love from a social, political, and collective perspective. Obviously, hooks is not the only scholar who theorizes love in this way – consider, for example, philosophers such as Deleuze and Guattari as well as Hardt and Negri – but she addresses the theme in the framework of patriarchy, developing the concept of love especially in the context of feminist scholarship.

The book consists of 13 chapters, preceded by an intimate preface as well as an introduction chapter. Hence, it will not be possible to go into great detail in this short review. In what follows, I will try to focus on those perspectives of the book which may be of interest to the readers of the *Journal of Resistance Studies*.

In the introduction, hooks critically discusses the existing literature on love while differentiating her own approach from others. She is very critical of the normal usage of the concept of love as it often "devalues and degrades its meaning" (p. 14). In chapter 1, hooks defines love as "the will to nurture our own and another's spiritual growth" (p. 6). One of her main arguments is that "love is as love does" (p. 14), that

is, love should not be considered a feeling but a practice. According to hooks, love cannot co-exist with abuse or neglect – instead, it materializes through acts of care, nurturance, trust, respect, knowing, commitment, and responsibility. This argument is strengthened in chapter 2 as hooks demonstrates that love cannot exist without justice, reflecting especially on the relationship between parents and children in this context. As childhood is the place where we first learn about love, hooks regards "unkind and/or cruel punishment meted out by the grown-ups they have been taught they should love and respect" (p. 17–18) as extremely harmful and confusing for children. In chapter 3 this is followed by discussion on patriarchal masculinity, lying, lovelessness, estrangement from feelings, the inability to connect with others, and the inability to assume responsibility for causing pain, all of which can be resisted, according to hooks, only through commitment to honesty and being true to love.

Throughout the book, hooks moves smoothly and sometimes surprisingly fast from an analysis of broader power structures (which are considered only partly external) to the personal, turning the gaze inwards. In chapter 4, she explicitly highlights the importance of self-acceptance and self-love as the foundation of the practice of love: "Giving ourselves love we provide our inner being with the opportunity to have the unconditional love we may have always longed to receive from someone else" (p. 67). If one is incapable of accepting and loving oneself, efforts to love others are destined to fail. What is beautiful in this conception of love is the strong emphasis placed on how we must not only avoid hurting others but also ourselves – that the practice of self-care and a kind, respectful, loving attitude towards oneself creates a basis for treating others in the same way. At the same time, it is important to uphold the willingness to stand up for oneself, that is, to practice "self-assertiveness" which is still too often regarded as "a threat to femininity" due to the requirement for girls and women to behave in a certain way, to be "good girls or dutiful daughters" (p. 59), which is very different from what is expected from boys and men.

Some of hooks' most interesting arguments are presented in chapter 5. She analyzes the literatures of the 1960s and 1970s, showing how love used to be celebrated as an active spiritual force with the potential of uniting all life. Much of the discussion on love back then vigorously

critiqued all forms of domination, oppression, violence, and dehumanization, as well as the marriage between capitalism and exploitation. As hooks points out, the focus later shifted from this important politicization of love to something very different: "Much as I enjoy popular New Age commentary on love, I am often struck by the dangerous narcissism fostered by spiritual rhetoric that pays so much attention to individual self-improvement and so little to the practice of love within the context of community" (p. 76). In the context of her own understanding of spirituality, hooks emphasizes that spiritual practices do not necessarily need to be connected to any organized religions to be meaningful, but it is possible for people to find their own sacred ways, for example, by "communicating with the natural world and engaging in practices that honor life-sustaining ecosystems" (p. 81). Recognizing that for many people it is unusual to "turn to spiritual thinking" unless they are experiencing serious difficulties in their lives, hooks talks a lot about the meaning of pain and sorrow, building on the conviction that the "place of suffering" can also be a "place of peace and possibility" if given a possibility to become accepted as such (p. 80). Although she does not give concrete advice on how to accomplish this, she refers to meditation and various spiritual practices many times in this context.

Perhaps the most timely part of the book is chapter 6 with regard to contemporary political debate on refugees, migration, and the rise of right-wing parties across Europe and the US. Regarding fear as the primary force maintaining the structures of domination – such as racism and patriarchy – hooks reminds us that if we are continuously being taught "that safety lies always within the sameness, then difference, of any kind, will appear as a threat" (p. 93). According to her, the mechanism is the same whether we talk about racism or patriarchy – they both rely on "socializing everyone to believe that in all human relations there is an inferior and a superior party" (p. 97), which then works to justify and legitimize various forms of domination, oppression, and exploitation. For hooks, the only way to struggle against fear is to connect with others, "to find ourselves in the other" (p. 93) by embracing an ethic of love based on care, respect, trust, commitment, and responsibility in our everyday lives.

In chapter 7 the ethic of love becomes intertwined with the ethic

of communalism through interdependency, the sharing of resources and the principle of "living simply" instead of material greed and overconsumption that subsume love and compassion and are fuelled by "spiritual and emotional lack in our lives" (p. 105). According to hooks, the "passion to possess" has replaced the "passion to connect" (p. 105–106), resulting in serious consequences. She links greedy consumption with dehumanization, arguing that it results inevitably in people being treated as objects – while choosing to live simply, on the contrary, contributes to our capacity to love and practice compassion. The relationship between patriarchy and capitalism is explored in more detail in chapter 8. Interestingly from the perspective of resistance studies, hooks is convinced that challenging these interconnected structures of domination is possible without necessarily joining any organized movements for social change by simply starting "the process of making community where we are" (p. 143). Clearly, this view is in tension with many traditional frameworks for social change built on instrumental, state-centric and/or masculinist conceptualizations of political subjectivity and social transformation, and comes closer to anarchist and autonomous traditions, as well as approaches in which the political is understood essentially as prefigurative and immanent.

In talking about forgiveness and servitude to others as acts of generosity, both of which are essential for spiritual growth and communal love, hooks takes up an issue which has a very special meaning in the context of nonviolent resistance – the willingness to sacrifice. Whereas it often represents more of a strategic approach in the context of nonviolence, manifesting also courage as well as commitment, for hooks the willingness to sacrifice for the sake of others is rather reflective of "our awareness of interdependency" (p. 143). She continues this discussion in chapter 9 through a reflection of the principle of mutual practice of giving and receiving, combined with the principle of sharing resources, whether time, money, attention, or care, which she considers very concrete ways to express love. Through giving, receiving, and sharing, love gains its meaning: again, through action, love materializes as a practice. This idea continues through chapter 10, which deals with romance, and chapter 11 in which the most intriguing part of the discussion revolves around death. The worship of death is, according to hooks, especially

powerful in Western traditions, and intimately related to the fear of the stranger: "We believe the stranger is a messenger of death who wants our life… Even though we are more likely to be hurt by someone we know than a stranger, our fear is directed toward the unknown and the unfamiliar" (p. 193). In hooks' view, the worship of death can be resisted by challenging patriarchy, working for peace and justice through the practice of love, and by giving away the fear of dying. As knowing how to love is also a way of knowing how to die, it "empowers us to live fully and die well" (p. 197). In this way, death becomes an integral part of living, instead of being an "abject" to be separated from life.

In chapters 12 and 13, hooks returns to the theme of wounding and healing, but focuses more attention on religion, reminding the reader that patriarchal perspectives have always strongly influenced religions. Although clearly articulating her interest in Christian traditions, hooks' spiritual practices and beliefs also resonate with Buddhist approaches. According to her, it is not accidental "that so many of the spiritual teachers we gravitate to in our affluent society, which is driven by the ethos of rugged individualism, come from cultures that value interdependency and working for a collective good over independence and individual gain" (p. 214). From the Buddhist tradition she introduces, among other things, the idea of "surrendering", which as a practice enables the creation of spaces of compassion where one can feel sympathy for oneself and others, thereby defying judgment as well as shame, both of which characterize patriarchy.

What makes these views interesting from the point of view of resistance studies is that in talking about the practice of love as something revolutionary, hooks suggest that one must "surrender the will to power", stressing that it is impossible to "know love if we remain unable to surrender our attachment to power" (p. 221). Moreover, she argues that all significant social movements that have struggled for freedom and justice have promoted love as their ethical foundation. While gaining recognition for challenging the traditional masculinist conceptions and definition of politics as the distinction between friend and enemy, hooks' concept of love has attracted some critical questions in regard to the relationship between the particular/local and the universal/global, with some scholars pointing out that "love" may be very well replacing God

in the secularized West. Despite the communal nature of hooks' conceptualization of love, the book has also been criticized for individualism, probably due to her very personal narratives combined with a sort of a "therapeutic" touch that we have become accustomed to interpret in a very particular way in the context of medicalized Western discourses. It is not entirely unjustified to criticize the book, one the one hand, for its essentializing critique of men and masculinity, and on the other hand, for its heteronormativity, the relationship between men and women being such a central theme in the book.

There are, however, many different ways to interpret hooks' arguments, some of which can potentially escape the above mentioned tensions. This can be done by approaching love from non-totalizing perspectives, in which love is not granted the position of God or Truth, and by taking conscious steps away from universalizing frameworks by embracing diversity both in the practice of love and with regard to its ontology and epistemology. From the perspective of resistance and resistance studies, the practice of love has potentially a lot to offer, for what hooks writes about care, community, and commitment can be seen taking place in many places across the globe where women come together to struggle against domination, oppression, dispossession, neoliberalism, patriarchy, racism, and sexism. One of the biggest challenges lies in how to promote this idea to a broader audience beyond feminist scholarship. Love and feminist solidarity are conceptually easy to connect with each other, but it is more demanding in the case of love and resistance. How can love be(come) a form of resistance? How can we resist with love? Can love be(come) the constitutive foundation of resistance? It is my conviction, based on critical perspectives arising from various cross-disciplinary intersections of resistance studies, and considering what is currently taking place in the world and world politics, that the time has come to seriously, and creatively, to address these questions.

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