

The Infinite Passion of Self-Absorption

Joan Frank

**REMEMBERED RAPTURE:
THE WRITER AT WORK**

bell hooks

Henry Holt

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Bell hooks's intentions, as declared, are golden: to speak for and to the disenfranchised, especially women, most especially women of color who may wish to write. Her reputation, as I understand it, depends greatly upon who's asked. To fans she is a fearless, radical feminist voice on behalf of the above-named ranks. The unconverted, however, have reactions which seem to range from doubt to disgust. Her sheer output apparently ignites its own controversy (as hooks often angrily notes): some fifteen prior books, for whose quality I can't speak. What I *can* say from reviewing these essays is that no matter what's under discussion, hooks seems primarily taken with hooks. The championing of feminist theory, civil rights, global justice, even the praise of writers she venerates, have a running subtext: the infinite absorption with the life and times and unfair pillorying by critics, of hooks:

These days when I see the small yet ample stack of books I have written (usually seen at book signings), I know that this body of work emerged because I am again and again overwhelmed by ideas I want to put in writing. Since my interests are broad and wide-ranging, I am not surprised that there is an endless flow of ideas in my mind.... Sometimes I feel an urgent need to write ideas down on paper to make room for new ideas to arrive, keep my mind from becoming too crowded.

What to make of statements so seamlessly irony-free, so self-satisfied as these? The above passage (defending her prolific output

in the essay "women who write too much") unfortunately indicates the quality of much that follows in this collection: in essence a bristling apologia; an explication of hooks's cause, and of her determination to carry it on:

A driving force behind my writing passion is political activism. Contrary to popular assumption writing can function as a form of political resistance without in any way being propagandistic or lacking literary merit. Concurrently, writing may galvanize readers to be more politically aware without that being the writer's sole intent.... A covert form of censorship is always at work when writing that is overtly espousing political beliefs and assumptions is deemed less serious or artistically lacking compared to work that does not overtly address political concerns....

In the preface, hooks poignantly outlines her reverence, since childhood, for the printed word, in a world of "mainly old folks" where illiteracy was common and writing considered an "awesome task, a burden"—and the fact that for black women writers particularly, recognition by contemporary culture will have to be hacked out arduously.

Hooks recounts the steps that led her from diary-keeping in childhood, (an act of self-shelter inside a boisterous family), to writing poetry "to confront that shadow-self," to the writing of a memoir of her girlhood which ultimately launched her on her current path as a prolific, self-described "cultural critic, literary scholar, and/or creative writer." The facts of her coming of age are moving, as are her fortitude and painstaking honesty. But her writing is harmed by long sentences filled with officious jargon, so that a reader can't grasp enough particularity to enter the story.

I longed to create a groundwork of being

that could affirm my struggle to be a whole self.... I was not trying to be rid of the shadows, I wanted instead to enter them. That encounter enabled me to learn the self anew in ways that allowed transformation in consciousness and being....

In sixteen of these twenty essays (composed over a twenty-year period, often overlapping or repeating material), hooks laments the mainstream press's stranglehold on the current literary marketplace: "While feminist intervention altered the nature of contemporary women's writing, it has had little impact on critical evaluations of that work in the mainstream press." Black women writers, she notes, feel it the worst:

With no acknowledged established intellectual traditions, saving contemporary ones, and even those are not widely acknowledged, black women writers of nonfiction working within the cultural context of white supremacist capitalist patriarchy have historically needed the interest of white readership to gain a hearing.... In general, the biases of racism and sexism as well as class elitism led the American public to feel that black women's voices are the least compelling when serious issues are at stake.

Hooks squares off with a number of difficult issues, including the identifying of writers with particular labels—class and background *do* matter, she finally decides, but "not absolutely"—and the "trashing" of black women writers by other black women writers.

Throughout this collection I was repeatedly struck by two things: hooks's apparent great earnestness and, alas, writing that is essentially tedious and artless. If a reader chooses to be "critically vigilant," does the latter observation cancel the former?

Hooks's prose veers crazily between therapeutic journal-keeping and formal academic speak. A clear statement of thought or feeling may get smothered in the next phrase or sentence by a rush of archscholasticism. Clichés abound;

punctuation's missing. It is as if hooks cast around and tossed everything she saw into the language stew with an idea of making it rich or authoritative. The result is sludgy and off-putting. Certain terms recur maddeningly: "concurrently," "grapple," "critical interrogations," and (most dreadful) "share," meaning variously to offer, explain, discuss, reveal, confess, suggest, inform, relate, and so on. Alliterative slogans—"self-discovery and self-recovery," "reconciliation and reclamation," "the act and art," "once sanctioned, became suspect," "echo and extend," "contestation and confrontation"—sound punched in willy-nilly: they go transparent before the reading eye, and the reader's eyes glaze over. While hooks is sharply critical of the straitjacketing quality of academic writing, her prose relentlessly joins academese with either psychobabble or the rhetoric of pamphleteering:

This precious powerful sense of writing as a healing place where our souls can speak and unfold has been crucial to women's development of a counter-hegemonic experience of creativity within patriarchal culture....

and

This is especially true of any dissenting voice that remains within a hierarchial [*sic*] institution founded on structures of domination where rewards and benefits are awarded in relation to service rendered.

Such deadpan declarations signal the purview and terms of the zealot: either speak this language or be turned away at the gates. But this is a book about the joys of writing, of creative literature! Hooks exempts herself neatly from mainstream objections:

Black writers, like all authors from marginal groups, always have difficulty gaining recognition for a body of work if anything we do is eclectic. Positive reception of our early work may mean that we are positioned by the critical and reading public in specific ways. Deviating from this may cause them confusion.

To paraphrase the creed of COYOTE, a national organization for sex workers, hooks is “calling off the old tired aesthetics.” Yet the writing and thinking that announce this is murky, self-aggrandizing, and flaccid.

The primary conflict of this collection is also its prime irony: hooks argues by implication for a cracking-open of modern literary aesthetics, to let in the new voices of those formerly locked out. At the same time, she insists that she is committed to rigorous “standards and craft.” My question would be, whose?

Every woman’s confessional narrative has more meaningful power of voice when it is well crafted. Women should not be afraid to critique a lack of standards in writing by women. To indulge in praising writing that is not compelling, that has no literary merit, means that critics collude in setting a stage for the devaluation of women’s words, for future silences. Yet the proliferation of published confessional writing may not mean that we permanently establish our place as serious writers within this canon. To be serious we must dare to be critical of our urge to tell our stories, of the ways we tell them.

Typographical errors and awkward, run-on sentences make me suspect that this collection was brought out in haste, and/or

that no editor was allowed to touch hooks’s prose. A ferociously righteous, young-Marxist tone pervades it: uninflected, void of irony, lyricism, or other shaping modulation, it reads like a policy statement which has tried to incorporate too many contingencies, mixing proto-revolutionary, academic, and pop-psych labels in an unapologetic hash.

The sentences play out and out inexhaustibly:

I call attention to the way writing has functioned therapeutically for me as a location where I may articulate that which may be difficult, if not impossible to speak in other locations because this need leads me to turn and turn again to the written words and partially explains the sheer volume of my written work.

Again, what sharpens a reader’s dismay is that hooks repeatedly declares herself an intellectual who passionately studies, teaches, and practices the ardent honing of her craft. Her stance seems to invite lively discourse and “critical vigilance” while simultaneously barring the measurement of writing against any aesthetic except a self-created one.

Confronting hooks’s work with candor poses a potent rhetorical trap. Hooks’s first line of defense is to accuse critics of insufficient engagement: “Rarely do mainstream critiques of my work talk about the content of the writing—the ideas.” The ideas in these essays appear humanely conceived but clumsily argued—in categorical, manifesto terms. To wit, we live in a white supremacist capitalist patriarchal culture (also called a hedonistic consumerist capitalist patriarchal



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culture). Those under its boots also deserve rich autonomous lives, including creative freedom, particularly for women of color. But if the writing that offers up this mission statement is fulsome and self-righteous to the point of caricature, what can it convey about the validity of its own standards?

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Hooks charges that entrenched white critics tend to shun her work because her thinking threatens their cushioned niches within mainstream culture. If black male critics object, they are betraying the cause of black (or disenfranchised) solidarity, or they are indulging the slightly-more-endorsed (by current lights) colloquy between a few privileged, educated black men. Finally, if black or non-white women dislike her writing, they are committing (to hooks) the most bewilderingly brutal betrayal of all—that of sisters of color, who should presumably hang together or be ground down separately. If anyone objects to her work strictly in terms of aesthetics, she can charge the critic is brainwashed by the old (white capitalist boys') canon.

Suppose, however, that the above groups shun hooks's work strictly because it's an embarrassing hodge-podge? It seems the enemy's utterances are automatically discounted, and whoever disagrees must be the enemy.

The last six essays examine women writers hooks admires: Zora Neale Hurston, Emily Dickinson, Ann Petry, Lorraine Hansberry, Toni Morrison, and Toni Cade Bambara; with little exception, these suffer the same lack of the coherent focus that might have compelled the audiences hooks most seeks to address. These pieces are also, regrettably, suffused with a flavor of hooks admiring herself admiring them.

Throughout this collection, hooks cites and quotes writers including: Virginia

Woolf, Emily Dickinson, Annie Dillard, Donald Hall, Tillie Olsen, Lorraine Hansberry, Cherie Moraga, Nancy Mairs, Toni Morrison, and Eva Figs, as well as spiritual thinkers like Howard Thurman and Martin Luther King, Jr. Nearly every one of these quotes leaps from the page and sings brilliantly into the reading ear, so starkly does each contrast with hooks's graceless sentences:

Challenging biases in the reviewing process as well as demanding of publishers that they remain open when selecting work by African-Americans so that unconventional material is not discarded or rewritten to appeal to the marketplace is necessary if we are to gain greater freedom to write what we want to write in the manner in which we wish to write it.

There are innumerable models of powerful, beautiful essay-writing on behalf of passionately humanistic causes by people of assorted ethnic and class backgrounds, famous and obscure: among the better-known, James Baldwin rushes to mind, as do E.B. White, Maya Angelou, Primo Levi, Natalia Ginzburg, Joel Agee, Richard Rodriguez, Richard Selzer, Richard Rhodes, Annie Dillard, Jamaica Kincaid. Hooks simply can't exist in the same room with them, except, in my view, as their student.

Hooks's own students (at City College, in New York) may genuinely be helped by her encouragement, her curricula, her "messianic zeal" (her term)—and by her story: the sheer grit of a sister making it up the cruel mainstream ranks. But to the degree that the writing in *remembered rapture* is touted as literary excellence, hooks does a grave disservice to literature.

Joan Frank is a Northern California writer of short stories, essays, and reviews. Her recent short fiction is forthcoming in The Antioch Review and The Kennesaw Review; her recent literary nonfiction appeared in The Iowa Review.