bell hooksian love: Enacting Power-Sharing as an ECE Praxis of Unlearning

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Abstract

This paper reimagines early childhood education and care through the radical lens of bell hooksian love. In a global climate shaped by violence, displacement, and neoliberal policies, children from refugee, immigrant, and multiply marginalized communities often experience exclusion within deficit-oriented and developmentalist frameworks. Drawing on the diverse works of bell hooks and our lived experiences as educators and researchers, we position love not as sentimentality but as a political and methodological commitment to justice, care, and relationality. Love becomes a counterstory to neoliberalism's emphasis on individualism and standardization, creating space for belonging, solidarity, and transformation in early childhood education and care. Through vignettes from our professional and research practice, we illustrate how love can function as both praxis and pedagogy, by centering children's lived experiences, knowledges, and potentialities. Ultimately, we argue that enacting love in early childhood education and care offers a pathway toward power-sharing, collective healing, and radical hope.

Key words: bell hooksian love, counterstories, early childhood education, power-sharing

Introduction

The contemporary world is marked by escalating violence, displacement, and inequality that disproportionately shape the lives of children and families across global contexts. Authoritarian regimes and neoliberal state policies increasingly curtail freedoms and perpetuate social divisions. The loss of free speech, the intensification of border controls, and the expansion of detention practices reflect a global climate hostile to migrants and refugees. Families are separated, children are detained or deported to countries they may have never known, and wars continue to generate widespread poverty, destruction, and death. These conditions fracture communities and exacerbate the vulnerabilities of children, whose lives are disrupted by forces beyond their control.

Amid these dynamics, neoliberalism, understood as a continuation of Western colonialism, has further entrenched systems of hyper-individualism, competition, and inequitable power relations. Within education, and early childhood education and care in particular, neoliberal logics manifest through standardization, surveillance, and deficit-driven narratives that marginalize children who do not conform to normative developmental trajectories (Michael-Luna & Castner, 2025). These narratives often render invisible the complex experiences of refugee children, immigrant families, children of color, children with disabilities, and others who are multiply marginalized. According to Love and Beneke (2021 p. 31), the term "multiply marginalized" is indicative of the ways in which children and youth experience intersecting forms of discrimination which includes but is not limited to classism, racism and ableism.

Developmentalism, with its universalizing and normative benchmarks, reinforces exclusion by positioning such children as "deficient" or "behind," rather than as individuals with rich and diverse ways of knowing and being (Love & Beneke, 2021 Souto-Manning, 2022).

Research itself is implicated in this process of exclusion. As Luker (2009) cautions, methodological traditions often appear neutral but in fact carry ideological norms that shape what is considered legitimate knowledge and who is deemed a viable research subject. This has profound implications for research with multiply marginalized children, particularly when notions of relationality, emotionality, and love are dismissed as "non-academic" (Cannella, 1997; Moss, 2010; Washington, 2024). The reliance on positivist epistemologies, rooted in white patriarchal and colonial traditions, limits our capacity to account for Black life, joy, healing, and alternative ways of knowing (Orsini, 2022). Consequently, there is an urgent need for methodological and theoretical approaches that resist deficit discourses and create space for counterstories and affirming practices (Miles, 2019). Within the context of this paper, our counterstorytelling practices in part seek to contribute to a long history of counterstorytelling practices within multiply marginalized communities (Delgado, 1989, Hill-Collins, 2000, 2022; hooks, 1994; Lorde, 1984).

Our contribution to this conversation emerges from our lived experiences as educators, researchers, and women whose identities are deeply entwined with the communities we serve. Nidhi, a mother, early childhood educator, immigrant, and woman of color, navigates daily the realities of racism, fear, and the struggle toward self-love, while remaining committed to creating spaces where immigrant and refugee families can share their stories on their own terms. Maria, the daughter of Greek immigrants and an educator working closely with children with disabilities, brings a parallel commitment to social justice activism and to dismantling deficit-oriented discourses in early childhood education and care. Together, we write from a position of relational accountability and commitment to justice, guided by our belief in the transformative potential of bell hooksian love (Washington, 2024). hooks (2001a, 2003) provides a framework for reimagining education as a site of radical possibility, where love becomes both method and praxis. Love, as hooks insists, is not a sentimental abstraction but an active, intentional practice rooted in justice, care, and the refusal of domination. In her conceptualization, love encompasses revolutionary self-love, familial love, and community care, which are dimensions often overlooked in academic treatments of the concept (hooks, 2001a, 2001b, 2002). By foregrounding love, hooks invites educators and researchers to resist the neoliberal ethos of competition and individualism and instead embrace practices of connection, solidarity, and shared humanity (Washington, 2024).

Positioning love within early childhood education and care is not merely an affective or symbolic gesture; it is a radical act of counterstorytelling (Delgado, 1989, Hill-Collins, 2000, 2022; hooks, 1994; Lorde, 1984). In a context where neoliberalism promotes division and fear, hooksian love fosters bridge-building across difference, cultivating possibilities for belonging, healing, and transformation (Brosi & hooks, 2012). This is especially significant when working with multiply marginalized children, whose lives are so often narrated through deficit frameworks. To enact love in this sense is to engage in unlearning the systems of power and knowledge production that perpetuate inequities (Orsini, 2022). It is also a commitment to relational practices that honor children's lived experiences, cultural knowledges, and potentialities. This paper offers a framework for reimagining early childhood education and care through bell hooksian love (Washington, 2024). We begin by outlining the conceptual grounding of hooks's philosophy of love, drawing from Black feminist thought and its emphasis on counterstorytelling, care, and solidarity (Hill-Collins, 2000, 2022; hooks, 1994, 2001a; Lorde, 1984). Next, we situate these ideas within the early childhood education and care context, examining how

neoliberal discourses of developmentalism have historically marginalized children who fall outside normative frameworks (Cannella, 1997; Pérez, 2017, 2020; Souto-Manning & Rabadi-Raol, 2018). We then share vignettes from our professional and research experiences with multiply marginalized children and families, offering illustrations of how hooksian love (Washington, 2024) might take shape in practice. Finally, we conclude with a discussion that highlights the transformative potential of cultivating love as a praxis of power-sharing and justice in early childhood education and care.

In contributing to this special issue, we seek to illuminate a pathway of hope—one that refuses fear, exclusion, and deficit narratives, and instead nurtures spaces of relationality, justice, and possibility. We do so not by romanticizing love, but by taking seriously its radical, collective, and justice-oriented dimensions as articulated by bell hooks. Our inquiry therefore begins with the following question: What are the ways in which power sharing with multiply marginalized children can enact bell hooksian love through a commitment to unlearning hyper-individualism?

What is bell hooksian love?

bell hooks's scholarship across decades returned persistently to the question of love—what it is, how it shapes our lives, and what possibilities it opens up for collective liberation. She resisted understandings of love as sentimental or individualistic. Instead, she positioned love as an ethic, a political practice, and a form of survival, especially for those marginalized by systems of racism, colonialism, ableism, sexism, and class oppression. In her words, love is "a combination of care, knowledge, responsibility, respect, trust, and commitment" (hooks, 2001b, p. xviii). This multidimensional framing emphasizes that love is not passive; it requires conscious action, accountability, and courage. When we bring this idea of love to the context of refugee children and families, it becomes a way of rethinking how we understand loss, survival, and belonging. Refugee families endure displacement, forced migration, and the rupturing of home and kinship networks (Guo et al., 2019; Menon, 2024; Yohani et al., 2019). Their children often enter educational and social systems that perceive them through a deficit lens—defined by what they have lost, rather than what they carry (Menon, 2021, 2024). hooks (2001a) challenges us to recognize that cultures dominated by violence and exclusion 'court death' by normalizing the strong preying upon the weak. In this sense, the marginalization of refugee children within schools and communities can be understood as a symptom of loveless systems that replicate domination rather than nurture healing.

Love, for hooks, is tied to the capacity to grieve and to hold loss with dignity. She argued that to love is to remain open to sorrow, even when grief is unending (hooks, 2001a). For refugee families, grief is not confined to the death of individuals but extends to the loss of familial ties, homelands, languages, and cultural continuity. When children and families are met with love—understood as care, respect, and commitment—grief can be held without shame. Love allows mourning to become a form of communication and communion, sustaining ties across life and death, across presence and absence. In this way, hooksian love provides a framework for educators and communities to engage with refugee families not as pathologized bearers of trauma, but as subjects whose grief and resilience can be dignified through relationships of love.

Importantly, hooks did not romanticize love as an easy or painless force. She recognized that to love requires risk: honesty, truth-telling, and the courage to confront domination (hooks, 2001a). For refugee families, this means that love in schools and communities cannot simply be about kindness or charity. It must involve systemic commitments to justice, by challenging racism, xenophobia, and the white supremacist logics that cast children of color as perpetual outsiders (hooks, 2001a, 2001b). As hooks (2001a) observed, white supremacy conditions individuals to perceive racialized peoples as threats regardless of their actions. Refugee children live with the effects of this gaze. To

practice a love ethic in relation to them is therefore to refuse fear and to affirm their humanity through trust, care, and respect. hooks also emphasized love's healing power. She described love as enabling us to put the broken pieces of our hearts back together, allowing us to live with the past in new ways (hooks, 2001b). For children displaced by war or persecution, love offers the possibility of renewal, of imagining a future that is not wholly defined by violence. This does not mean forgetting pain but rather integrating it within a framework of dignity and belonging. Love, then, becomes both an individual and collective act of healing.

Finally, hooks reminded us that love must be present in families and communities if they are to thrive. She insisted that not all families are sites of dysfunction; many are places where love abounds and conflict is managed without coercion or violence (hooks, 2002). For refugee families often stereotyped as "broken" or "in crisis," this perspective is particularly important. It allows us to imagine and affirm refugee households as spaces of care, resilience, and possibility, rather than always sites of deficit. When educators and policymakers shift from viewing refugee families through deficit frameworks to seeing them through a love ethic, they open up possibilities for solidarity, healing, and justice. bell hooksian love provides both a critique of systems that dehumanize and a vision for how we might live otherwise. It requires that we meet refugee children and families with care, respect, and accountability; that we honor their grief and resilience; and that we commit to dismantling the structures of lovelessness, that manifests as racism, exclusion, and domination, that shape their everyday lives. To center love in this way is not sentimental but radical. It is to insist that love is a practice of survival, a foundation for justice, and a path toward reimagining belonging for displaced children and families.

In sum, as a counterstorytelling practice, bell hooksian love (Washington, 2024) responds to the injustices inhabited and experienced by multiply marginalized children. In order to do so, the perspectives, experiences, and knowledges of multiply marginalized children are understood as integral and vital contributions to cultivating community. By disrupting and contesting the role of developmentalism in co-constituting and reproducing deficit-oriented practices (Souto-Manning, 2022), bell hooksian love is also an invitation to unlearn taken for granted assumptions that perpetuate practices of discrimination (Orsini, 2022), while cultivating community in and through embracing embodied and cultural differences. In a sociocultural context where the hyper individualism of the neoliberal ethos co-constitutes more of the same exclusions, bell hooks' invitation to reach out towards each other in a spirit of mutual respect, wonder, and radical love aims to contribute to a vibrant history within Black feminist thought (Hill-Collins, 2000, 2022; hooks, 1994, 2001a; Lorde, 1984) and Critical Race Theory (Delgado, 1989). It is also an invitation to contest and resist neoliberalism's corrosive and fractious reproduction of an increasingly top down approach to implementing policies in early childhood in a manner that seeks to further entrench racist, classist and ableist barriers to accessing programs and services (Michael-Luna & Caster, 2025; Urbani et al., 2022).

In the next portion of this paper, we will further explore the important role bell hooksian love (Washington, 2024) can play in identifying how multiply marginalized children experience conditional inclusion or outright exclusion. We will do so by first contesting the continued dominance of developmentalist logics. By briefly examining the role of developmentalism in promulgating and reproducing a discriminatory neoliberal ethos, we seek to contest the ongoing reproduction of discriminatory practices as the current status quo in early childhood. Similarly, in order to demonstrate how bell hooksian love can be enacted as a transformative praxis that seeks to both unlearn and learn with and from multiply marginalized children, the next portion of this paper shares two vignettes from our experiences as educators. By focusing on how multiply marginalized children and their families have contributed in transformative ways to our processes of learning

and unlearning our aim is to demonstrate how enacting a praxis of bell hooksian love offers opportunities to not only contest an unjust status quo but also to reimagine more socially just relations with each other.

Contesting Developmentalism Through a Praxis of bell hooksian love

Despite numerous critiques from critical disciplines across a spectrum of sociological mediums of inquiry, developmentalism continues to play a dominant role in shaping early childhood policy and practices (Farley, 2018; Mills and Lefrançois, 2018; Walkerdine, 1993). As a representative example, teachers in Ontario, Canada are increasingly mandated to spend more time engaging in assessment. Program Policy Memorandum 168 (PPM 168) explicitly states that the purpose of newly (as of September 2024) implemented early screening tools are for the increased monitoring of, as well as for the collection of, more data on the progress and development of learners in the early years (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2024). In practical terms the implementation of PPM 168 means that multiply marginalized children such as refugee and newcomer children as well as children with disabilities continued to be viewed and represented through deficit discourses. This is the case because early reading screeners make assumptions regarding what types of responses count as representations of appropriate reading behaviours. Steeped in research findings where developmentalism remains the unquestioned default position, PPM 168 also mandates that parents are informed when children are not meeting expected normative benchmarks (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2024). In this sense, PPM 168 reproduces an unbalanced power dynamic that requires educators to compare multiply marginalized children to normative benchmarks. This mandated requirement always and already discounts and excludes the perspectives, experiences, knowledges and rich contributions of multiply marginalized children. Put differently, through policies such as PPM 168, developmentalism continues to dominate the field of early childhood in ways that reproduce the continued exclusions of multiply marginalized children.

As educators and researchers who are committed to engaging in strength-based, socially just and inclusive approaches to teaching and learning with children, we are disheartened by the persistent role developmentalist logics continue to play in excluding multiply marginalized children. When policies like PPM 168 represent reading as an individual skill acquired by individual children it also continues to promulgate the hyper individualism of a neoliberal ethos that continues to view the unequal distribution of wealth, power, and resources as the way things are (Michael-Luna & Castner, 2025). By not considering how children are always and already situated within and contributing to socio-cultural systems of knowledge making and sharing, currently mandated assessment practices misrepresent and discount the varied and embodied ways that children make and share meaning. Similarly reducing the act of assessing children's knowledge to measuring if a child can identify a CVC word such as C-A-T (consonant-vowel-consonant), we also lose out on opportunities to cultivate community. Thus, through shifting and reorienting teaching and learning through a praxis of bell hooksian love (Washington, 2024), we advocate for foregrounding radical love. This requires contesting and resisting simplistic notions of developmental ages and stages. This also entails the embracing of the complex, messy and often fraught tensions that go along with building bridges of inclusion and belonging with multiply marginalized children. In other words, we engage with bell hooksian love as a tactic and strategy that aims to promote the kind of critical consciousness required for what Urbani et al (2022, p. 91) have referred to as the "on ramp to inclusion."

To demonstrate how a praxis of bell hooksian love acts as a counterstorytelling practice that resists deficit discourses about multiply marginalized children, each of us has shared an example from our experience in the field of early childhood. Maria shares an autoethnographic example from her teaching practice. As a matter of professional and

research considerations as it pertains to ethical practices, the experience Maria shares from her teaching, which refers to Fatima (pseudonym) does not divulge any uniquely personal information about a specific child but is intended to be a representative example of a series of similar teaching and learning interactions. Nidhi shares an example from her doctoral research with Syrian refugee children and their families which received ethics approval from the Research Ethics Board at the University of Toronto. As part of this study adult participants provided informed consent to participate and for their stories to be used in knowledge dissemination. In tandem both of these vignettes not only seek to contest deficit-based practices but also to engage in a heartening praxis of transforming conceptions of teaching and learning with young learners.

Beyond The Reach of Early Reading Screeners: Making and Sharing Connections with Fatima (Maria's Vignette)

In my role as the Special Education Resource Teacher (SERT), I work with Fatima (pseudonym) in her grade three classroom. Low test scores depict and represent Fatima as a struggling learner. Yet, despite the continued focus on collecting data about Fatima and all young learners, access to resources that might support Fatima to learn and share what she learns with her peers and teachers are being continually stripped away. These policy decisions that have seen ongoing cutbacks on resources are paradoxically justified through discourses of inclusion (conflated with and narrowly actualized in policy as spatial inclusion) at both the provincial and local levels. For example, due to the quantity of classes I am assigned to support, I only have the opportunity to work with Fatima and her classmates for 80 minutes per week. If Fatima had been my student just a few short years ago, she would have received 150 minutes of support per week. If Fatima had been my student 10 years ago, she likely would have met the criteria to receive 150 minutes of support per day. I situate Fatima in this context as my first act of enacting a praxis of bell hooksian love because it is representative of the ways in which data points collected about Fatima as mandated by school policies are always and already a partial and limited representation of Fatima. My first act of bell hooksian love understands that it is not Fatima who is failing but rather it is the school system that she is embedded in that is failing her. I should also say that as an educator in this system, I too feel like I am failing her. Time and in particular not having enough time to learn with and from Fatima is inextricably linked to my understanding that I am always and already not doing enough.

One morning I anxiously looked at the clock, and I realized that I have 10 minutes left to work with the students in Fatima's class and Fatima has not yet had a turn to read with me. I send a student back to their desk and I call Fatima over to the class's round table. Fatima shares that she is wearing a new pair of shoes that her parents bought her because her old ones were too small. She is happy and smiling as she tells me about her new shoes. We read a story about a boy who wishes he can fly and has his wish come true when he gets to travel on an airplane to visit his grandparents. I asked Fatima if she would have to travel on an airplane to see her grandparents. She tells me that her grandmother lives in a different apartment in the same building where she lives. She sees her grandma every day, and she loves spending time with her. I tell Fatima that when I was her age, I had not yet met my grandparents because they lived far away. I tell her how lucky she is to be so close to her grandma. Her face is full of joy as she smiles at me. As we share our connections to the story we read together, I look at the clock and realize that it is past time for me to go to my next class to support another group of students. I am late and behind schedule. I tell Fatima that we will continue our reading next week before I hastily gather my resources and move on.

Discussion: Enacting a Praxis of bell hooksian love in the Neoliberal Classroom

To me a vital part of bell hooksian love (Washington, 2024) means resisting the deficit-based narratives about Fatima that are generated through the developmentalist and

neoliberal discourses we both inhabit. In the midst of data points that represent Fatima through deficit discourses, Fatima and I find ourselves in the middle of a neoliberal classroom. In the current moment inclusion has been conflated with and reduced to spatial inclusion because it makes for a more cost-effective neoliberal classroom. This neoliberal classroom is in part shaped by the intersecting vectors of developmentalism and conceptions of what counts as suitable capital investment that generate the conditions where Fatima and I do not have enough time to learn together. The neoliberal and developmentalist logics that have generated the conditions for the learning circumstances Fatima, and I find ourselves in the middle of, continue to reproduce barriers that exclude Fatima from accessing needed resources to support her with her learning journey. This is happening alongside the mandated accumulation of data that continues to represent Fatima and scores of children like her through a deficit narrative. As an experienced educator and novice researcher, this invites me to ask questions about the types of data being collected under policy mandates such as PPM 168, the purpose of their collection and their role in reproducing the conditions of inaccessibility, exclusion and inequality. Every narrative or set of knowledge claims or a data set, always and already tells a partial story. Refusing the deficit-based narrative induced by the conditions of developmentalist and neoliberal discourses serves as a reminder that there is more to the story than the narrative of lack told through the data accumulated via PPM 168 policy mandates.

Through enacting a praxis of bell hooksian love (Washington, 2024), the wonderful and necessary partialities and limitations of a story, or a set of knowledge claims or a data set become an opportunity to cultivate community with each other. Engaging in opportunities to cultivate connections and relationships while building community with and for each other are acts of a resistance that flip deficit-based scripts. They are also transformative acts because they are embedded in an understanding that because of each of our partialities and limitations, we need each other. Through accepting the invitation to learn with and from each other's experiences while reading together, Fatima and I break away from the deficit-based narrative that we are embedded in and surrounds us.. I am touched by her joy and happiness as she describes how much she loves spending time with her grandmother. In our short time reading together, she has made important connections to what she has read by reflecting on her own daily experiences.

Similarly, the connections we have both shared with each other are part of a bell hookisan love that foregrounds "*filia*" (Brosi & hooks, 2012, p. 83-84). Brosi and hooks remind us that there are many words for love in the Greek language and one of them is "*filia*." *Filia* is when we reach beyond ourselves and what we think we know by cultivating loving relationships in and through the communal connections we make together. Even in the short period of time that was really not enough time, part of Fatima's life experience has imparted joy and happiness to my own teaching and learning experience. Despite the systemic constraints and barriers limiting our time together, Fatima and I found a way to connect with each other and in doing so tell a different story through a praxis of bell hooksian love.

"We Feel Like One Family" Karima and her talk about migrating with other refugees as an act of love (Nidhi's Vignette)

Karima (pseudonym) is a Syrian refugee mother of four who migrated to Canada with her family in 2016. Before the war, she lived in Damascus, where life was steady and familiar. When the conflict intensified, Karima and her family fled to Jordan, where they spent several years before being resettled in Toronto through Canada's refugee sponsorship program. Karima's story speaks to the intimate ties formed through displacement—how migration itself, though shaped by loss, can also be an act of love. Her reflections reveal how care and kinship are cultivated not only within biological families but also among those who journey and rebuild together. This case description draws from a semi-structured interview conducted in English using a Black feminist

storytelling methodology; the interview was audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim, and her words are presented without grammatical correction in order to preserve the integrity and meaning of her voice. Below is an excerpt from our conversation, where Karima speaks about what "family" has come to mean to her in Canada:

Nidhi: Can you tell me a little about your journey to Canada?

Karima: I came to Canada in 2016. I was living in Damascus, Syria. But when the war came, I left to Jordan. Then I came to Canada from Jordan. It was a very difficult time for us because everything was new, new culture, new people, new life. We didn't know anything about it. We stayed in a hotel for two and a half months when we arrived. It was a very difficult time, but we learned a lot from volunteers. They came every day to teach us about Canada, about the rules and culture. That helped us a lot.

Nidhi: You mentioned that the people who came with you from Jordan are still part of your life now?

Karima: Yes. Most of the people we came with still live near us. I think our Arabic community is very strong here. We live in Thorncliffe now, and most of the families who came with us are in the same building or nearby. When we came here, all of our kids were about the same age. They opened their eyes around each other. They went on trips together. Because we lived in the hotel for a long time, we felt like one family.

Nidhi: You said your children are happy here. Do they have both Canadian and Arabic friends?

Karima: Yes, of course. They have Canadian friends and friends from Syria. But they are happier with their Arabic friends because they speak the same language and understand each other. They feel very comfortable with them. Me too. When I meet people from my country, I don't have a hard time. We came together, stayed together, ate together. That's why we feel like family.

Nidhi: What about the volunteers you mentioned, did they help you stay connected?

Karima: Yes, a lot of volunteers worked with Syrian refugees when we arrived. For almost four years, they called us for trips and activities for the kids, and programs for women to learn English. It helped us so much. I think we visited most places in Toronto through them! When we first came, we thought life here was always like that, every day, ten volunteers coming to take us to museums or picnics.

Nidhi: How do you stay connected with the people you met then?

Karima: I have maybe sixty women friends in Canada. We met through those programs. Some still live near us, but others moved away. Still, we feel comfortable when we talk. We always say hello when we see each other in the park or the building. All of us have kids, our husbands work, we have no family here, so we become family for each other.

Discussion: Love as Refuge and Resistance

Karima's story reveals love as an everyday practice of survival and solidarity. Her migration from Syria to Canada was, in her words, "very difficult," marked by rupture, uncertainty, and the loss of familiar worlds. Yet, within this dislocation, she and other refugee families, along with the support of volunteers, forged powerful bonds—living together, eating together, and raising their children as "one family." Through the shared experience of displacement, love became a form of collective care and a means of rebuilding community in a place that was both unfamiliar and, at times, unwelcoming.

bell hooks's (2001a, 2001b, 2002) work on love helps us read Karima's story not merely as one of adaptation but as one of resistance. hooks understood love as an ethic and a political act, a combination of "care, knowledge, responsibility, respect, trust, and commitment" (hooks, 2001b, p. xviii). She urged us to move beyond sentimental or privatized notions of love and instead see it as a radical force that can sustain life in the face of domination. In this sense, Karima's act of forming a "new family" with other refugees is not incidental; it is a practice of bell hooksian love (Washington, 2024). It embodies care and mutual responsibility, the courage to trust, and the refusal to remain isolated in a system that often fragments refugee lives.

For refugee families, migration is both a wound and a gesture of love, a determination to seek safety and possibility for one's children. hooks reminds us that love involves holding grief with dignity, staying open to sorrow while remaining committed to life. Karima's narrative of loss, of home, language, and proximity to kin, is intertwined with her capacity to create belonging anew. Her community of refugee mothers, who meet daily in the park or the apartment building courtyard, enact love as a politics of survival. They recreated networks of care and love through this community of women and mothers that defy the individualism of Western society and the deficit narratives that cast refugee families as dependent or broken. Within dominant educational and social discourses, refugee children are often defined through a framework of lack, of language, stability, or cultural "fit." hooks (2001a) would name these frameworks as expressions of a loveless culture, one that courts death by normalizing domination and dehumanization. Karima's experience gestures toward another possibility: when love circulates through acts of mutual care and recognition, it becomes a mode of healing and resistance. The shared meals, the children playing together, the women learning English in community space, all these small gestures illustrate how love rebuilds the social fabric torn by displacement.

Importantly, hooks warns that love is not without struggle. To love in conditions of exile and racialized exclusion requires courage, the courage to persist, to grieve, to tell the truth about injustice. For educators, policymakers, and community settlement workers, this means that engaging with refugee families through a love ethic demands more than empathy. It calls for transformation: dismantling racism and affirming families like Karima's as sites of knowledge and care. Karima's narrative, viewed through hooks's lens, invites us to see migration not only as movement across borders but as a relational and ethical act. Love, here, is not abstract. It is the shared laughter in the park, the comfort of a familiar language, the everyday work of sustaining each other's dignity. It is, as hooks writes, 'a practice of freedom.' In the lives of refugee families, love becomes both refuge and resistance—a radical assertion that even in displacement, community, care, and hope can endure. For educators, a hooksian ethic of love (Washington, 2024) invites a reimagining of how refugee children and families are engaged within schools and early learning settings. To love is to move beyond pity or charity and toward solidarity—to listen, to learn, and to act with accountability. It means recognizing refugee families not through deficit frameworks but as communities of care and wisdom. When educators cultivate trust, respect, and mutual responsibility, they participate in love as a political praxis, one that resists the dehumanizing logics of exclusion and opens possibilities for belonging, healing, and justice in educational spaces.

Reading Karima and Fatima's Stories in Tandem with Each Other: Implications, Next Steps and Concluding Thoughts

According to Washington's (2024, p. 4) analysis and articulation of a bell hooksian love as an active praxis: "love is best displayed through intentionality and commitment to oneself and others." In distinct yet linked ways both Karima and Fatima are active participants and contributors in the making and sharing of knowledge within their communities. As educators, scholars and researchers, we have been moved by the parts of their respective stories that have touched our own lives. Our loving connections with

Karima and Fatima have invited each of us to disrupt deficit discourses that remain dominant in early childhood settings. They have also invited us to share a set of more complicated counterstories that reveal the ways both Fatima and Karima or more than statistics derived from an always and already partial data set. Infused with joy, happiness, grief, loss and sacrifice, the small moments shared with and from our experiences with Fatima and Karima are representative of the kind of community building that is possible. When we embrace our own partialities and limitations we have the opportunity to learn with, for and from each other in ways that foster reciprocity, connection and yes love for each other. Thus, even as the social institutions we are embedded in increasingly exhibit top-down autocratic tendencies (Michael-Luna & Castner, 2025), Fatima and Karima remind us that love always seems to find a way. It is a reminder to each of us irrespective of our social roles that we too must find a way to contest and resist the status quo so that we can transform our fractured and eroding communities into a "beloved community" (Brosi & hooks, 2012, p. 76).

"To love well is the task in all meaningful relationships" (hooks, 2002, p. 138). These poignant words from bell hooks serve as a reminder to all early childhood educators about the importance of infusing our work with love by embracing and learning with and from children and their families. This includes children and families who embody and inhabit social, cultural, racial, class, gender and disability identifications that vary from our own. Brosi & hooks (2012) note that because we inhabit an unjust social structure, loving and creating a beloved community requires addressing tensions, conflicts, fears and uncertainties. It also means moving from the "politics of domination", "one upmanship" and "winning" to one where "reconciliation" is enacted in meaningful ways (Brosi & hooks, 2012, p. 79-80). In other words, enacting a bell hooksian love praxis means intentionally listening to the stories of ordinary people and engaging in the difficult, challenging and joyous work of making and sharing connections with each other especially when it appears seemingly impossible to do so. Fatima and Karima have shown us how empowering a counterstorytelling praxis imbued with love can be. So, we invite you to join us. Join us in our journey through these dark, fractious and unjust times by embracing a bell hooksian love praxis with and for each other.

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