

bell hooks

Early Life

Born 1952 – Gloria Jean Watkins, Hopkinsville, KY

Father – Veodis Watkins – janitor at the PO

Mother – Rosa Bell Watkins – homemaker, part-time maid

5 sisters, 1 brother

Her father was a traditional patriarch. Her parents fought often, and engaged in both verbal and physical altercations. In her memoir *Bone Black*, she often writes of her childhood in third person (especially when she is writing about traumatic events), as if she is outside of herself watching events unfold: “Out of nowhere he comes home from work angry. He reaches the porch yelling and screaming at the woman inside—yelling that she is his wife, he can do with her what he wants. They do not understand what is happening. He is pushing, hitting, telling her to shut up. She is pleading—crying. He does not want to hear, to listen. They catch his angry words in their hands like lightning bugs—store them in a jar to sort them out later. Words about other men, about phone calls, about how he had told her. They do not know what he has told her. They have never heard them talk in an angry way. She thinks of all of the nights she lies awake in her bed hearing the woman’s voice, hearing his voice. She wonders if it is then that he is telling her everything—warning her. Yelling, screaming, hitting: they stare at the red blood that trickles through the crying mouth. They cannot believe this pleading, crying woman, this woman who does not fight back, is the same person they know. The person they know is strong, gets things done, is a woman of ways and means, a woman of action. They do not know her still, paralyzed, waiting for the next blow, pleading. They do not know their mama afraid. Even if she does not hit back they want her to run, to run and to not stop running. She wants her to hit him with the table light, the ashtray, the one near her hand. She does not want to see her like this, not fighting back. He notices them, long enough to tell them to get out, go upstairs. She refuses to move. She cannot move. She cannot leave her mama alone. The woman—her mother—nods her head yes. She still stands still. It is his movement in her direction that sends her up the stairs. She cannot believe all her sisters and her brother are not taking a stand, that they go to sleep. She cannot bear their betrayal. When the father is not looking she creeps down the steps. She wants the woman to know that she is not alone. She wants to bear witness” (146-147). Rose did leave Veodis once, but she came back.

Gloria escaped through reading/writing. She published her first poems in her Sunday school magazine. She also read her poems and recited scripture at church.

Over the years she tried to be close to her mother: “I am most passionate in my relationship with mama. It is with her that I feel loved and sometimes accepted. She is the one person who looks

into my heart, sees its needs and tries to satisfy them. She is also always trying to make me be what she thinks is best for me to be. She tells me how to do my hair, what clothes I should wear. She wants to love and control at the same time. Her love is sustained and deep. Sometimes I feel like a drowning person saved by the pulling and tugging, saved by the breath of air that is her caring. I want to tell her this but the gifts we buy on Mother's Day, at Christmas, on birthdays seem only to make a mockery of that love, to suggest that it is something cheap and silly, something that is not needed. I do not want to give these gifts. I do not want to take these times to show my care, times someone else has chosen. She interprets my silence, my last-minute effort at a gift, as a sign of the way I am an uncaring girl. The fact that I disappoint her leaves me lying awake at night sobbing, wanting to be a better daughter, a daughter that makes her life brighter, easier. I am a pain to her. She says that she is not sure where I come from, that she would like to send me back. I want so much to please her and yet keep some part of me that is myself, my own, not just a thing I have been turned into that she can desire, like, or do with as she will. I want her to love me totally as I am. I love her totally without wanting that she change anything, not even the things about her that I cannot stand" (139-140).

As a child, she was punished often and severely. Her parents didn't like her intellectual pursuits. She ended up adopting the name bell hooks from her maternal great grandmother: "To subdue the impulse of silence, of returning to that place inside her body where 'her heart was all shattered,' Gloria Watkins constructed a writer-identity that would allow her to disassemble the self she was without really having to die a physical death. 'Choosing this name as a pseudonym was a rebellious gesture,' hooks states. 'It was part of a strategy of empowerment, enabling me to surrender Gloria, give her back to those who had created her, so that I could make and find my own voice, my identity.' She uses the lowercase letters...partly because of her ongoing involvement with Buddhism, 'to get away from that ego attachment that we have to a name. So the use of the small letters was a way to sort of say, first, it's not really me because I'm not just the book that I've written. I'm a holistic self.' Thus, hooks's act of renaming herself reestablished her tie to life itself as she created an alternative community of sisterhood bound by the common thread of cultural silence, and empowered by the common need to speak into existence the very essence of their being" (Dictionary of Literary Biography).

Adulthood

Her first book was titled *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (a title taken from Sojourner Truth's speech at the women's rights convention in 1851). She began writing it in 1969 while an undergraduate at Stanford, but didn't publish it until 1981.

While she was an undergraduate she started a relationship with a man she called "Mack." It lasted for 12 years, though they eventually went their separate ways. They struggled with issues related to their writing, sex, and their professional freedom. She writes about this relationship in an experimental work *Wounds of Passion*. She is bi-sexual, and she has dated outside of her race. She has never married: "It may have been the pretend Tom Thumb wedding she had to

participate in during first grade. It may have been that the tearing of her red crepe-paper bridesmaid dress convinced her she would fail at marriage just as she had failed at the pretend wedding. She knew that the pretend marriage had made her suspicious—nothing about it had been enjoyable. Whenever she thought of marriage she thought of it for someone else, someone who would make a beautiful bride, a good wife. From her perspective the problem with marriage was not the good wife, but the lack of the good husband. She is sixteen years old. Her mother is telling her again and again about the importance of learning to cook, clean, etc., in order to be a good wife. She stomps upstairs shouting, I will never be married! I will never marry! When she comes back downstairs she must explain why, she must find words—Seems like, she says, stammering, marriage is for men, that women get nothing out of it, men get everything. She did not want the mother to feel as if she was saying unkind things about her marriage. She did not want the mother to know that it precisely her marriage that made it seem like a trap, a door closing in a room without air” (97-98).

BA 1973 - Stanford

MA 1976 – University of Wisconsin – English

PhD – 1983 – UC Santa Cruz – Dissertation on Toni Morrison

Poetry Chapbook – *And There We Wept* – 1978

She saw that black women were not considered in the history of the women’s movement: “As she saw it, black women were placed in a double bind; to support women’s suffrage meant supporting a movement that ignored the racial implications of womanhood. Conversely, if black women supported the political activities of the Civil Rights movement of the mid nineteenth century, or the mid twentieth century, for that matter, they ran the risk of being subjected to the same patriarchal social order that dogged white women advocates. Moreover, the political practices of the previous suffrage movement had detailed, in painstaking clarity, the sexist and racist social order that systematically denied black women full human rights. For hooks, the startling similarities between the earlier and more recent social movements compelled her to investigate further the intersections of race, class and gender [intersectionality], and more specifically, how these categories influenced the ideological paradigms of both women’s liberation movements (DLB).

1984 – *Feminist Theory from Margin to Center* (the two readings you are doing come from this book).

Later Life

hooks was often criticized for writing about the intimate details of her life in works that are seen as academic or activist pieces: “Many critics have questioned hooks’s decision to write about the most intimate details of her life, yet her decision to do so underscores her belief in the

transformative power of language....:’The public reality and institutional structure of domination,’ writes hooks, ‘make the private space for oppression and exploitation concrete—real. That’s why I think it crucial to talk about the points where the public and the private meet, to connect the two’” (DLB). This is a common assertion of feminism—that the personal is political. She believed the private must enter the public space so that change may occur in both: “Moving from silence into speech is for the oppressed, the colonized, the exploited, and those who stand and struggle side by side a gesture of defiance that heals, that makes new life and new growth possible.’ ...For hooks, the act of speech, of ‘talking back,’ is no ‘mere gesture of words,’ but an expression of movement from object to subject” (DLB).

1985 – Assistant Prof. at Yale – she had a bad experience at Yale, which she wrote about in her book *Talking Back*.

1988 – full prof. at Oberlin

In 1990 she published a book of essays, *Yearning: Race, Gender and Cultural Politics*, which won the American Book Award.

From that book: “hooks makes a definite distinction between ‘chosen’ marginality and ‘forced’ marginality; the latter is a position imposed on one by structures of oppression, while the former is a position one adopts as a site of resistance and creative transformation. hooks deems chosen marginality to be fertile space—that space that can be appropriated and transfigured through artistic and literary practices. ‘I am writing to you...from a place in the margins where I am different, where I see things differently... This is an intervention. A message from that space in the margin that is a site of creativity and power, that inclusive space where we recover ourselves.’ In revolutionizing the very manner in which one approaches this space, hooks reshapes the actual dynamic of power as the function of appropriation, which, in and of itself, constitutes an act of resistance for those relegated to the margins. Moreover, her creative approach to resistance reaffirms in one way, and encourages in other ways, the primacy and necessity of liberational struggle” (DLB).

1991: together with writer Cornel West, she wrote *Breaking Bread*, which addresses the importance of recovering one’s past, tradition, history and heritage. hooks believed that black women have been overlooked as serious critical thinkers. They face both racism and sexism.

1992 – *Black Looks: Race and Representation*

1994: *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*. Learning as liberation. Revolution.

1994: *Outlaw Culture: Resisting Representations* – controlling the images of people is central to dominating them.

1994 – 2001: Distinguished professor at City University of NY

Between 1995 and 2014 she published 18 books:

1995: *Killing Rage: Ending Racism*

1995: *Art on my Mind: Visual Politics*

1996: *Reel to Real: Race, Sex and Class in the Movies*

1996: *Bone Black: Memories of Girlhood – memoir*

1997: *Wounds of Passion – memoir*

1999: Children's book

2000: *All About Love: New Visions*

2000: *Where We Stand: Class Matters*

2001: *Salvation: Black People and love – Self-love, love each other in order to overcome internalized racism*

2001: *All About Love: New Visions*

2002: *Communion: The Female Search for Love*

2003: *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope*

2004: *The Will To Change: Men, Masculinity and Love*

2004: *Rock My Soul: Black People and Self-Esteem*

2008: *Belonging: A Culture of Place*

2009: *Teaching Critical Thinking: Practical Wisdom*

2014: *Feminism is for Everybody: Passionate Politics*

2014: *Sisters of the Yam: Black Women and Self-Recovery*