

bell hooks (1952-2021)

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The first time I read bell hooks I was 22 years old. I don't remember how it happened, but I found a digital version of *Elogio del margine* (1998) on my laptop. The sides of the pages were barely legible, an indication that they had been photocopied directly from the book. I am grateful to those who thought of scanning the book, and in doing so made it possible for me to find myself in hooks' thoughts.

Elogio del margine came out in 1998 for Feltrinelli, and collected some of the author's essays, selected by the Italian translator Maria Nadotti. Discovering hooks was a liberating moment. Her ability to recount the experience of marginality and translate it into a collective narrative meant for me the beginning of a process - even though slow, contradictory, and far from its conclusion - of recognition. This recognition is made up of a double movement of deconstruction and reparation. Deconstruction of the way of conceiving knowledge that produces marginalization. Reparation of the possibility of conceiving another way of doing knowledge.

Recognition is therefore acknowledgment of the power structures intrinsic to white, bourgeois, patriarchal, heteronormative, Euro and Christian-centric epistemology and gnoseology, but also recognition of the possibility of discovering and creating other epistemologies, capable of including and representing the experience of marginality.

bell hooks passed away due to illness in December 2021, at her home in Berea, Kentucky. In these pages, I will attempt to reconstruct some passages that I consider crucial in her life and in her work. To do so I will use as a guide some extracts from *Sisters of the Yam: Black Women and Self Recovery*, published in 1993 by Massachusetts' South End Press, a text that I consider to be as fundamental as undervalued, and that collects the strategies of self-recovery that hooks and her sisters developed in their support group. Through these extracts, I will try to articulate some of the central themes of hooks production. I chose to do so using *Sisters of the Yam*, a self-help book, to reiterate the author's idea that knowledge, to be transformative, has a primary function of self-recovery.

1. Gloria Jean Watkins

I decided to be a writer when I was still at home, still in grade school, and of course made public announcements and shared my work with family and friends. Everyone agreed that I had talent. I could act and I could write. I went away to college to study drama and everyone believed that I would one day come home, to the world of my ancestors, and be a teacher in the public schools. I did not return (1993, 19)

bell hooks was born Gloria Jean Watkins in 1952 in Hopkinsville, a rural town in segregated Kentucky, to a working-class family. Her mother was a homemaker, her father a janitor, and bell had other five siblings. From an early age, she found herself to be an outsider regarding the power dynamics that she endured and escaped from at home. bell will recount in her books the conflicts she experienced in the family because of her unwillingness to obey.

The author will repeatedly articulate in her texts this dimension of disobedience that led her to “critically love” her family. hooks will use theory to understand her own experience, turning something apparently personal into something political and collective¹.

In *Teaching to Transgress*, she narrates of the passion she has had for knowledge since childhood. A curious and intellectually lively person, she used to seek through theory the answers to the questions she incessantly asked herself. In the same book, however, she tells of the difficulties she experienced in the transition from the segregated to the desegregated school. Indeed, if desegregation seems, on the surface, a positive sign of social progress, it also meant the obligation for the Black minority to integrate into the white school system. According to hooks, this

¹ “Black parents’ obsession with exercising control over children, making certain that they are ‘obedient’ is an expression of this distorted view of family relations” (1993, 47).

ambivalent process forced Black people to move from an institution where knowledge was understood as an instrument of liberation, to one where their experience was invisibilized. In fact, in the black classroom knowledge was a mean towards an end, and that end was survival. On the contrary, in the white institution education “merely strives to reinforce domination”. This type of knowledge does not challenge the status quo but is rather bent on reproducing it. Both practices of knowledge are political, but the first was committed to freedom, the latter to teach obedience to authority - an authority that was inherently racially, class and gender connotated.

Gloria lives this change negatively, so much so that she felt apathic, lost her interest in school and withdrew from studying. Despite all, however, Gloria found her way back to her passion for theory, and the experience helped her to develop a critical perspective on education: an engaged pedagogy. Because of the transition from the segregated to the desegregated school, she understands that “[t]heory is not inherently healing, liberatory, or revolutionary. It fulfills this function only when we ask that it do so and direct our theorizing towards this end” (1994, 61).

After high school Gloria obtained a degree in English Literature from Stanford University (1973) and continued her education at the University of Wisconsin (1976). During her Stanford years (1971) she began writing her first book, *Ain't I a Woman: Black Woman and Feminism*, which was not published until 1981. In the same years, moved by the absence of Feminist and Black theory and thinkers in the curriculum, Gloria decided to try her hand at teaching. In fact, she taught her first class devoted to Black women writers and Black feminist thought while being still an undergraduate.

2. bell hooks

For years I was a sharp-tongued woman who often inappropriately lashed out. I have increasingly learned to distinguish between 'reading' and truth-telling (1993, 50).

Gloria Jean Watkins became known under the pseudonym bell hooks in 1978, with the release of her first publication: *And There We Wept: poems*. Gloria chose bell hooks as her pseudonym in honor of her matrilineal ancestry, of Rosa Bell Watkins her mother, and Bell Blair Hooks, her maternal great-grandmother, a woman that was known for being sharp-tongued. The choice to use the name with lower case initials is instead due to a desire to give precedence to the ideas over the individual who promotes them.

Bell Blair hooks was not the only sharp-tongued woman in the family. hooks says that she grew up in a family of "sharp-tongued women, who were known to raise their voices, to argue and cuss, and that because of this, she and her five sisters learned early on how "telling it like it is" could be used as a weapon of power to humiliate and shame someone" (1993, 43). Gloria will therefore choose to turn her sharp-tongue and use it to express another truth. She learned "to distinguish between reading and truth telling" and made her "telling the truth" an instrument of liberation and healing. Telling the truth hence means exposing the power structures that produce violence, even when this violence is acted by marginalized group because of internalized shame and self-hate.

In 1983 hooks was awarded a doctorate in English Literature from the University of California, Santa Cruz, with a thesis on the work of writer Toni Morrison. hooks' academic career is full of success and accolades, leading her to teach at several universities including the Southern California University, Santa Cruz, San Francisco

State University, Yale, Oberlin College, City College of New York and, finally, at Berea College.

An extremely prolific writer, she has published thirty-nine volumes between poetry, non-fiction, self-help, and children's books. Her writing is clear and straightforward, according to her desire to create theories that are accessible to all. hooks has been influenced by activists, thinkers and artists such as Sojourner Truth, Lorraine Hansberry, Martin Luther King Jr., James Baldwin, Paulo Freire, Thích Nhất Hạnh, and of course Toni Morrison and Audre Lorde. Especially Lorde is an inescapable reference in the author's work. With Lorde, who like her ventures into different forms of writing, hooks not only share a place as one of the leading voice of Black feminism, but also and above all, the authors share their themes of research, expression, and commitment. These arguments are in fact common to a broader Black Feminist production, and embrace reflections on the body, on representation, care, reparation, and healing.

Black feminist thought arises at the intersection of gender and race, highlighting how every racial construction is always gendered and vice versa. Precisely because it stems from this intersectional positionality, Black feminism is most concerned with the lived experience of black women, experiences that comprise slavery and marginalization, hyper-eroticization and de-sexualization, devaluation and dehumanization. Therefore, Black feminist theories and practices are most concerned with the themes and concepts that can represent these experiences, make sense of them, and heal them. In a lot of different ways, hooks paved the way for these reflections.

2.1. Body

Care of the self begins with our capacity to tenderly and lovingly care for the body. Black women often neglect our bodies (1993, 101).

Black feminist epistemologies come from a renewed understanding of concepts and practices such as positioning. Embodied knowledge has a critical importance for Black feminists. For these thinkers the body, which is completely marginal in the (supposed universalistic) eurocentric scientific production, is a primary space of experience, hence of knowledge. Even more so, the body here doubles up, qualifying itself as both a legitimate object and subject of knowledge.

Throughout her production hooks insists on the importance of the body, of its presence and of the meaning accorded to it. The author acknowledges the fact that blackness is condemned to be 'only body'. The identification of blackness with corporeity stems from the colonial "split" between mind and body, where the latter must be subservient to the former. The body refers to animality and for this reason associating blackness with corporeality is a way of reaffirming the non-humanity of Black people. Reversing this perspective hooks invites not only to care for one's body, but also, in doing so, to break out of colonial dichotomies that impose fictitious divisions. In particular, hooks invites Black women to take care of their bodies, bodies devalued and exploited by society, bodies whose beauty and sacrality is not recognized. According to hooks, we do not "have a body", "we are a body", and as part of our being we must be able to express ourselves through the body, to express care for ourselves and others.

2.2. Representation

Certainly the slaves understood better than anybody that to be able to love blackness in a white world they had to create images - representations of their world that were pleasing to the sensibilities and to the eye.

[...]

Clearly, if black women want to be about the business of collective self-healing, we have to be about the business of inventing all manner of images and representations that show us the way we want to be and are (1993, 95-96).

Bodies of course need to be represented. Representation is a theme that hooks touches on repeatedly. According to the author, there is a need to multiply representations of blackness so that younger Black generations can have positive references to resort to. The need to see oneself represented and to be able to represent oneself has to do with the issue of recognizing one's individuality, humanity and worth.

Representation is linked to self-determination and decolonization (2015, ix), because, as literature has shown, there is a relation between “the internalized self-hatred of black folks and the constant consumption of hateful representations, especially in the realm of popular culture” (*Ibidem*). According to hooks “[t]here is a direct and abiding connection between the maintenance of white supremacist patriarchy [...] and the institutionalization via mass media of specific images, representations of race, of blackness that support and maintain the oppression, exploitation, and overall domination of all black people” (lvi, 2). Gaining control on how one's represented is crucial, for if one keeps on being represented by others, they can only see themselves through others' eyes. Hence, a change in the realm of “image-making” and culture is necessary to produce social transformation and Black liberation.

2.3. Care, reparation, and healing

Though many of us recognize the depth of our pain and hurt, we do not usually collectively organize in an ongoing manner to find and share ways to heal ourselves. Our literature has helped, however. Progressive black women artists have shown ongoing concern about healing our wounds. Much of the celebrated

fiction by black women writers is concerned with identifying our pain and imaginatively constructing maps for healing (1993, 21).

hooks' entire theoretical production can be seen as an effort aimed at healing. It is a healing from intergenerational trauma, from the violent history that as an African American she inherited. It is a healing from gender-based violence, which takes on a specific character when interlocked with racial oppression. Above all, it is a healing that is collective but that passes first and foremost through daily self (and sisters') care.

To care is to repair the broken bond between the individual and society, building that beloved community that is central to hooks's. Not for nothing, in *All About Love*, hooks argues that "rarely, if ever, [...] any of us healed in isolation. Healing is an act of communion." (2000, 215). Healing is a necessary and unavoidable step towards collective liberation. It is achieved through care and testimony, by naming one's oppression, by stopping to reiterate oppressive relations and by replacing them with sisterly and loving ones.

3. Death and presence

Many southern black people have held to the belief that a human being possesses body, soul, and spirit - that death may take one part even as the others remain (1993, 114).

In her later years hooks returns to live in Kentucky. Not to teach at the local school, but as a professor at Berea College. hooks escapes the fate that had been assigned to her and, at the cost of having to grow up and live far away from her family and her roots, she wins her freedom as a thinker, writer and teacher.

“When we allow our dead to be forgotten, we fall prey to the notion that the end of embodied life corresponds to the death of the spirit” (2000, 202). Although bell hooks has left us, her spirit is present among us more than ever. It is present because we seek it, because we feel we need it. It is no coincidence that more translations of the author’s texts are planned in Italy in the coming years than we have seen so far. In fact, *Elogio del margine* is published in 1998 and *Tutto sull’amore* (*All about love*, 2000) in 2003, and until 2020 these remained the author’s only two translated texts. In 2020, *Insegnare a Trasgredire* (*Teaching to transgress*, 1994) was published and *Elogio del Margine/Scrivere al buio* reissued. To date, seven more translations are scheduled for three different Italian publishers.

hooks is a thinker of healing, of mending, of repair. She is a critical thinker whose acumen illuminates power dynamics and shows possible alternatives to what seems like an inescapable human fate of gender, racial, sexual and class hierarchies.

hooks has made her mark within the Black and feminist thought, and has already raised at least two generations of critical thinkers. There is no doubt that for many generations to come, bell hooks’ guiding voice will continue to inspire paths of liberation with, within, and beyond theory.

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