Aneta Ostaszewska

Becoming bell hooks

A story about the self-empowerment of a Black girl who became a feminist

WUW

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Table of contents

Preface

My joy is when people are working with my work.[1]

In the summer of 2018, I finished writing the book that was the consummation of my long-standing interest in bell hooks's writings, and bell hooks the person. Working on it had also been the story of my writing as a feminist researcher. After bell hooks's unexpected death in December 2021, I realized how little I had managed to write about her, and how much I owed to her both academically and personally. Her writing, her approach to life and her committed feminism all made me find in her the companion and teacher in the world of academia I'd always longed for. Although I sometimes disagreed with her, it was always a creative disagreement, which then enriched my capacity for seeing and "reading" the world. And now, she is gone… Her words remain. I don't want them to fade. Hence the idea of publishing this book was born. Here the core of the 2018 Polish edition has been updated, revised and completed. In this way, I want to bring back the memory of bell hooks and her postulate to "speak with your voice," which led me to create this book. R.I.P.

[1] bell hooks with Theaster Gates and Laurie Anderson, *Public Art, Private Vision*, 2015. Retrieved June 30, 2023, from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fZ3WJoNC4lU&t=2814s.

Introduction: why bell hooks?

They do not want to hear that the shared reality of femaleness does not mean an equal share in powerlessness.[2]

I remember my first encounter with bell hooks. It was her book *Talking Back. Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black*—a collection of essays published in 1989. I read it twenty years after it was first published, at a time when bell hooks had a very long list of publications to her credit. I bought the book on sale, reaching for it because of the striking bright cover, the word "feminist" in the title and the author's name: bell hooks. I didn't know anything about the author, but if someone writes their name with a lowercase letter, I thought, *I want to know why*. I opened the book. I started reading and couldn't stop. Every sentence seemed worthy of remembering. And not just because they talked about important things, but because the author's language and writing style just drew me in. It was a story I'd always wanted to read: vivid, emotional and often intimate since it was strongly based on autobiographical experiences. Never before had I read such a delightfully dense story, yet so unconstrained in form at the same time. That's how I remember bell hooks from our first meeting—not only as a woman writing her stories. I was fascinated by how she *wrote herself*.

Back in 2009, the essays in *Talking Back…* were for me the greatest gift from fate. Someone was finally articulating what I had not been able to do myself and had intuitively sought for a very long time while reading more and more autobiographies by women. Autobiographical

[2] bell hooks, *Wounds of Passion. A Writing Life*, Holt, New York 1997, p. 98.

writing, especially feminist autobiographical writing, sets these writers on a path to emancipation and development. Right at the very beginning of *Talking Back…*, there is a sentence that has marked my reading of bell hooks: "Even before the words, we remember pain,"[3] as if to say that the basis of (her) writing is pain.

I returned to these words and these essays many times. I felt that sooner or later, I would write a book about a Black woman from a small town somewhere in Kentucky, who became bell hooks, a leading intellectual and representative of Black feminism. The ideas that guided me from the very beginning of my work on the book were, on the one hand, to try to understand the author's biographical experiences through the lens of a female subject, and on the other hand, to meta-analyze them using the concept of biographical work. What I found particularly inspiring for research was bell hooks's postulate: "speak with your voice." I read it as a kind of imperative, an emancipatory strategy, prompting self-reflection and self-discovery and, ultimately, self-empowerment. The emancipatory and pedagogical tone resounding in this postulate became the keynote of this book.

Writing the book was a staggered and multi-stage process. It began with the accumulation of very casual notes written ad hoc while reading texts by bell hooks. This phase, initiated in 2010, led, after some time, to an attempt to organize my earlier reflections and verbalize them in seminar and conference presentations. Based on these, I prepared my first paper on bell hooks's works.[4] Its publication made me realize that my academic work to date and my ongoing research had been only a prelude, a preparatory stage for writing THIS very book.

There were specific difficulties and challenges associated with getting into the writing. The most important ones were related

[3] bell hooks, *Talking Back. Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black*, South End Press, Boston 1989, p. 4.

[4] A. Ostaszewska, Kobiece praktyki autobiografistyczne na przykładzie wybranych esejów bell hooks. Perspektywa pedagogiki feministycznej, *Teraźniejszość – Człowiek – Edukacja*, 2015, 18/4(72), pp. 37–51. Retrieved June 30, 2023, from http://cejsh.icm.edu.pl/cejsh/element/bwmeta1.element.ojs-issn-1505-8808-year-2015-volume-18-issue-4_72_-article-oai_ojs_kwartalniktce_edu_pl_article_197.

to the search for adequate methodological and analytical tools that would enable methodical work on bell hooks's texts. After a thorough search, which included reading literature in sociology and pedagogy, I decided that the key concept suitable for interpreting the phenomenon of bell hooks would be biographical work. It provides an interesting category for analyzing "the process of becoming" in the course of a biography, where the central position is taken by the work needed to improve one's quality of life.

Some doubts stemmed from a perceived lack of coherence during the preparation of the project. To put it another way, I needed to mature to write this book. It required not just adequate substantive preparation, but also achieving such a degree of self-awareness and readiness so that I, following bell hooks's postulate, could truly write "speaking with my own voice." In practice, this involved openly declaring that I was writing a scientific text from an engaged feminist perspective and was challenging the androcentric social order, including that prevailing in academia.[5]

My understanding of feminist perspective—or, more precisely, feminism—is particularly close to Rosi Braidotti's definition: a question behind which is the courage to speak about oneself in terms of a subject, and the courage to realize one's own potential.[6] Vikki Bell writes in this context about the feminist imagination.[7] I understand this as a special kind of self-consciousness—an awareness of one's own position in the social space, which is more complex than a simple ability to analyze the social world regarding history, politics, etc., in terms of societal differences and gender. In my opinion, feminist imagination is a specific social sensitivity, externalized, among other things, in one's attitude when acting for equality and fair treatment of people regardless of gender, age, socio-ethnic characteristics, etc. This book is an expression of my feminist imagination.

[5] I write more about my research approach and the role of feminist methodology in the chapter *The Research Approach*.

[6] R. Braidotti, The Subject in Feminism, *Hypatia*, 1991, 6(2), pp. 155–172.

[7] V. Bell, *Feminist Imagination. Genealogies in Feminist Theory*, Sage, London 2000.

A woman writer as a causal subject

The introduction of the concept of gender into the feminist discourse in the mid-1970s has made the use of the term "woman" increasingly problematic.[8] Referring to the sexual difference as a fundamental feature of women's identity is sometimes seen as a manifestation of essentialism and/or advocacy for a binary gender system. My intention in writing about the female subject is not to uphold claims that the sexual difference between men and women is natural and unchangeable. Nor is it my goal to overlook the differences that exist among women themselves. I resonate with Braidotti's approach, which asks the question of who a woman is, while at the same time accepting that there is no single unchanging femininity that can be captured once and for all.[9] In this book, I primarily want to focus on the figure of a woman writer who achieves self-empowerment through reflection on her own life in the course of biographical work. She sees herself as a person equipped with the attributes of agency and responsibility for one's choices.[10] I chose the term "self-empowerment" because, in my opinion, it best reflects the meaning and purpose of bell hooks's biographical work. It involves the multidimensional realization of one's own creative abilities, while in a feminist context, it is "the manifestation of the redistribution of power that challenges patriarchal ideology and male dominance."[11] This book is therefore a symbolic attempt to rehabilitate women as a social group too often overlooked and disregarded in a culture that primarily values the male subject.

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[8] See, among others, J. Butler, *Gender Trouble. Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Routledge, London–New York 1990.

[9] A. Derra, Ciało – kobieta – różnica w nomadycznej teorii podmiotu Rosi Braidotti [in:] *Terytorium i peryferia cielesności. Ciało w dyskursie filozoficznym*, A. Kiepas, E. Struzik (eds.), Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego, Katowice 2010, pp. 449–469.

[10] On the concept of empowerment and self-empowerment in the context of women, see, among others, N. Kabeer et al., *Discussing Women's Empowerment. Theory and Practice*, Sida, Stockholm 2001; M. Karl, *Women and Empowerment. Participation and Decision Making*, Zed Books, London 1995.

[11] S. K. Chandra, Women and Empowerment, *Indian Journal of Public Administration*, 1997, 43(3), pp. 395–399.

Who is bell hooks?

> *Inside me I am still the country girl who never goes anywhere, the girl who will never be a woman—a girl who knows that to become woman is to leave the space of power.*[12]

bell hooks (1952–2021) is the pseudonym of Gloria Jean Watkins (GJW[13]), an African American intellectual: writer, pedagogue and scholar, poet and feminist. She made her debut as an author in 1978 with a volume of poems entitled *And There We Wept* and in 1981 published her first non-fiction work, *Ain't I a Woman. Black Women and Feminism*, which dealt with the topic of Black women in American society. She wrote more than 30 books during her career, focusing mainly on the questions of intersectionality,[14] racism, social inequality and gender-race-class discrimination.

The life of bell hooks is not a typical case in the statistical sense, although it fits the well-recognized model of social advancement through education. It is the biography of a Black woman whose experiences were shaped first by racial segregation and then desegregation in the 1960s and 1970s in the United States. She pursued her ambitions by taking advantage of systemic education—receiving tuition from Stanford University and the University of Wisconsin enabled her to build an academic career. A descendant of slaves who could neither read nor write, she became one of the most acclaimed intellectuals and writers of the late 20th and early 21st centuries.[15]

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[12] bell hooks, *Wounds of Passion…*, p. 5.

[13] In the remainder of this book, I will use Gloria Jean Watkins's initials, GJW.

[14] On intersectionality and intersectional analysis, see, among others, K. Crenshaw, Mapping the Margins. Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color, *Stanford Law Review*, 1991, 43(6), pp. 1241–1299; R. Johnson, Gender, Race, Class, and Sexual Orientation. Theorizing the Intersections [in:] *Feminism, Law, Inclusion. Intersectionality in Action*, G. MacDonald, R. L. Osborne, C. C. Smith (eds.), Sumach Press, Toronto 2005, pp. 21–37.

[15] A sort of analysis of bell hooks's educational biography was made by Nassira Hedjerassi in an article on the social construction of intellectual women: N. Hedjerassi, bell hooks. La fabrique d'une « intellectuelle féministe noire révoltée », *Cahiers du Genre*, 2016, 61, pp. 169–188.

Structure of the book

The book has a classic structure. It consists of six chapters, the first two of which are theoretical. In the first chapter, I describe the field in which I have placed my research—the field of autobiography. I focus not so much on presenting possible definitions of the concept but on pointing out those attributes of autobiography that make it a material of interest for social research, besides being a literary genre. I draw special attention to the features of women's autobiographical writing. In the second chapter, on biographical work, I bring up concepts such as biographicity and *Bildung*. My goal is to show that biographical work is exceptional in providing a broad and comprehensive space for feminist research on the process of shaping female subjectivity and for effecting self-empowerment. I place this process in the course of an autobiographical story.

The theoretical chapters provide a conceptual background for the analysis of the empirical material described in chapters five and six. The methodological function is fulfilled by chapters three and four, where I describe and consider the main issues of the research, in which reflexivity, a basic tool in qualitative research, plays a significant role. I then outline the fundamental and general research problems that define the field of analysis.

Reading and analyzing autobiographical texts require a special kind of focus and a critical attitude to determine which part of the text evokes interest and for what reasons, in addition to what influences the interpretation of the autobiography, and how. I refer to this type of research approach as close reading.[16] I discuss the importance of close reading in analytical work and reflect on the role of feminist methodologies in biographical research in chapter three. I assume that my critical and engaged research approach and identification

[16] Close reading emerged as a postulate of my research work during my doctoral studies (2002–2006), which culminated in the defense of a doctoral thesis in 2007. Since then, the theme of mindful reading has accompanied me in my research work and appears in most of my publications. During the research described in this book, I developed this postulate further.

with feminism have methodological significance. At the end of this chapter, I present the analytical strategies used in the biographical method, paying particular attention to those proposed by Daniel Bertaux and Catherine Delcroix, which have been an inspiration for me in analyzing the biographical work of bell hooks. I devote chapter four to the presentation of empirical material, a reconstruction of bell hooks's biography and a discussion of her writing. The empirical material consists of bell hooks's autobiographical texts from three books: *Talking Back. Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black* (1989), *Bone Black. Memories of Girlhood* (1996), *Wounds of Passion. A Writing Life* (1997).

Chapters five and six present an analysis of bell hooks's autobiographical texts and a reflection on the course of the author's biographical work. I begin by tracing the roles that she takes on while writing her autobiography. I distinguish three such roles: the narrator, the biographical subject and the observer/commentator of her own life. I then reflect on the importance of feminist consciousness in the author's process of self-discovery.

In the last chapter, referring to bell hooks's statement: "I was mapping a different destiny,"[17] I look at her reflections on the process of writing an autobiography and the components of the author's autobiographical narrative. I follow with the argument that the writing of an autobiography constitutes an emancipatory process and, as a self-empowering activity, enables the creation of an autonomous space for the expression of one's own voice, hence "speaking with one's own voice."

Final remarks

Working on bell hooks's biography and her texts was a lesson in keeping a focused awareness regarding both writing about others and writing in general. Although scientific research forces the objectification of the studied persons/subjects, this does not necessarily

[17] bell hooks, *Wounds of Passion…*, p. x.

invalidate research accountability or reflexivity. Adopting in this book a personal and committed stance, which I describe as feminist, means that the research work and writing impose certain obligations on me, primarily moral ones. Not once do I use the words "my heroine." This is by conscious and deliberate choice. Firstly, I considered it inappropriate to use the pronoun "my" to refer to the subject-object of my research, as it could indicate an attempt to appropriate her persona. Secondly, the use of the phrase "my heroine" could be read as over-identifying with the author of the texts in question.

Another important issue is related to the use of the terms "Black" and "Blacks." In order to maintain consistency between bell hooks's texts and my narrative, I decided to use the terms used by the author. Since she was writing about herself as a "black woman," I followed her example. I believe that there is no justification for introducing other terms, which could ultimately seem artificial.[18] However, when characterizing the group and the author's living environment, I also use the term "African American."[19]

In bell hooks's texts, the phrases "black woman" or "black people" are often spelled with a lowercase letter, whereas I use the form "Black"/"Blacks." This is due to the need to emphasize the subjectivity of the people I write about, but it also has significance from a linguistic perspective. By capitalizing "Black"/"Blacks," I stress the fact that I am referring not to skin color, but to "Blackness" as an identity attribute. Thus, I use these expressions not in a strictly adjectival sense, but rather in a pronominal sense, while still retaining their adjectival form. Although the term "black" refers to the color

[18] I am aware that the term "black" also has negative connotations. However, since I am referring directly to bell hooks's texts, I am using the conceptual grid she uses. The accusation of perpetuating negative, offensive expressions describing Black people is therefore unfounded. In bell hooks's texts, as well as in public circulation, the terms "people of color," "person of color" or simply "colored people" also appear. However, I chose not to use those terms for several reasons. First of all, I wanted to avoid proliferating synonymous expressions. In addition, using more terms would require clarifying the context in which they are used, which goes beyond the scope of this book.

[19] The term "Blacks" is broader than "African Americans," since it does not indicate a specific cultural and ethnic group, but all those who are not "White."

of bell hooks's skin, it is also a significant feature of her identity and stems from a specific socio-political context. Unlike Polish society, American society is not ethnically homogeneous. Skin color is therefore something more than skin color—it becomes a carrier of identity.

1. Autobiography as a research field

> *Telling one's own life story can be considered the most significant, meaningful task undertaken by anyone and determines one's sense of identity, their image of the world and of other people. At the same time, it has a social meaning because it is associated with understanding one's place in the social world, with planning activities and designing the course of events.*[20]

In a broad sense, autobiography is the story of one's own life, which has an interpretive dimension in addition to the factual one. This dimension is the effect of reflecting on one's life by relating autobiographical experiences to one's knowledge and self-knowledge. This is how biographical work comes to fruition.

1.1. An attempt at a definition

The term "autobiography" comes from Greek and consists of three elements: *autós*, *bíos* and *gráphō*, which mean, respectively, the writing self, life/experience and writing.[21] Therefore, it is literally a description of one's life. The following definition can contribute to the discussion on what an autobiography is:

> [Autobiography is] one's own full or partial life story; a statement about oneself, i.e., one whose subject matter is the fate, trials, thoughts and lived

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[20] A. Giza, *Życie jako opowieść. Analiza materiałów autobiograficznych w perspektywie socjologii wiedzy*, Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, Wrocław 1991, p. 108 [translator's note: all translations from Polish are mine (Helena Marzec-Gołąb)].

[21] M. Głowiński et al. (eds.), *Podręczny słownik terminów literackich*, Open, Warszawa 1999, p. 32.

> experiences of an individual presented by that person themselves in greater or lesser connection with external reality.[22]

There are several important threads in this definition: the question of authorship (one's own), the scope (full or partial life story), the object of study (fate, trials, thoughts and lived experiences) and the relationship to external reality. In addition, the term "statement" appears, indicating that autobiography does not have to be exclusively in written form; it may just as well be an oral narrative. All these elements—the question of authorship, the scope of autobiography, etc.—have been the subject of in-depth, often critical, analysis and discussion in both the humanities and social sciences.

However, the multiplicity of theoretical positions (philosophical, literary, anthropological, historical, psychological, sociological, pedagogical, etc.) and the diversity of autobiographical forms (text, oral story, graphic/visual presentation, etc.) compel me to outline a rather general framework and present only a few selected ways of understanding and interpreting the concept of autobiography. The selection is subjective and deliberate, dictated by my reading of autobiographical texts by women and guided by the idea of creating a fairly broad horizon of looking at the issue of my interest. I want to show that autobiography is not only a fascinating subject of cognitive study in various scientific disciplines, but also that it is impossible nowadays to think about autobiography without taking into account the interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary perspectives. As I will show below, it is an area of research in which different perspectives, both epistemological and methodological, intersect. It is thus difficult to discuss it without going beyond the epistemologically narrow framework of a single discipline of science.

I will begin by citing the concepts developed by scholars who specialize in literary criticism and literary history, among others.[23]

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[22] D. Szajnert, s.v. Autobiografia [in:] *Słownik rodzajów i gatunków literackich*, G. Gazda, S. Tynecka-Makowska (eds.), Universitas, Kraków 2006, p. 51.

[23] It is not my goal to present autobiographical theories in historical terms. Nor am I trying to confirm or refute the hypothesis that theories about autobiography emerged first in the context of literary research. I do not take up this thread at all.

These concepts primarily take as their object of analysis autobiographies published in the form of books, written by well-known public figures who are often associated with literature or, more broadly, with the arts. Many fundamental questions have been articulated in the field of literary studies, including those that tackle the status of the autobiography, which remains unclear to this day. For some, autobiography is a literary genre and for others, a type of reading.[24] The main point of disagreement is the problem of *referentiality*.

Roman Zimand sees referentiality as the basic criterion for defining autobiographical texts.[25] The Polish researcher assumes that autobiography is a non-fiction text, which distinguishes it from literary fiction, represented mainly by the novel.[26] Zimand classifies autobiography as belonging to personal document literature, a rather broad area of autobiographical writing that also includes journals, diaries, memoirs and letters.[27] The two fundamental poles of the literature of the personal document are the world of writing about oneself directly and the world of eyewitness testimony. These poles are assigned certain writing approaches: the confessional approach and the approach of a witness who gives an account not so much of oneself as of the observable world. To these autobiographical approaches distinguished by Zimand, Małgorzata Czermińska adds a third one, the challenge approach, thus creating the autobiographical triangle. This approach provides a space for the reader to engage—a place for some kind of "you."[28]

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[24] In a 1968 article, Stephen A. Shapiro called autobiography "the dark continent of literature." See S. A. Shapiro, The Dark Continent of Literature. Autobiography, *Comparative Literature Studies*, 1968, 5(4), pp. 421–454.

[25] R. Zimand, O literaturze dokumentu osobistego w ogóle a o diarystyce w szczególności [in:] idem, *Diarysta Stefan Ż.*, Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, Wrocław 1990, pp. 32ff.

[26] Non-fiction prose consists of three categories: non-fiction, personal document literature and essay.

[27] The essential feature of personal document literature is "the singular: primarily the first person thereof, joined by the second in letters." R. Zimand, *Diarysta…*, p. 16. The term "personal document" itself was borrowed from sociology. More on this in the following section of the chapter.

[28] M. Czermińska, *The Autobiographical Triangle. Witness, Confession, Challenge*, transl. by J. Ward, Peter Lang, Berlin 2019, pp. 24–26.

The presence and active role of the reader is a theme that is explicitly addressed in post-structural theories.

With the spread of post-structuralism in the 1970s, critical methodology became increasingly important. The concepts of language as a neutral medium and the text as a reflection of "real" experience became objects of critique. These concepts assume that the subject, as well as the reality depicted in the (autobiographical) text, are not *reflections* of extra-textual reality but are *constructions* of it. The famous statements of Roland Barthes or Michel Foucault about the "death of the author" even proclaim the end of authorial intention.[29] According to Barthes, the author of the text is not the sole interpreter or "owner" of the text, for in the act of reading, it is the reader who gives meaning to the work and in turn becomes the creator of the text.[30] Foucault, meanwhile, refers to the category of discourse: "In short, it is a matter of depriving the subject (or its substitute) of its role as originator, and of analyzing the subject as a variable and complex function of discourse."[31]

The theme of the subject as solely a metaphor for the actual author is also taken up by Paul de Man, who argues that both the text itself and the writing subject are created. Another problem, however, is the impossibility of enclosing autobiography in a specific genre framework because autobiographical texts tend to move seamlessly into other types of speech:

> Autobiography, then, is not a genre or a mode, but a figure of reading or of understanding that occurs, to some degree, in all texts. The autobiographical moment happens as an alignment between the two subjects involved in the process of reading in which they determine each other by mutual reflexive substitution. The structure implies differentiation as well as similarity, since both depend on a substitutive exchange that constitutes

[29] The author as an institution, not a person who gives themselves the right to be an authority on the reading of the text.

[30] R. Barthes, The Death of the Author [in:] idem, *Image, Music, Text*, essays selected and transl. by S. Heath, Fontana Press, London 1977, pp. 142–148.

[31] M. Foucault, What Is an Author? [in:] idem, *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology*, ed. by J. D. Faubion, transl. by R. Hurley et al., (*Essential Works of Foucault, 1954–1984*, Vol. 2), The New Press, New York 1998, p. 221.

> the subject. This specular structure is interiorized in a text in which the author declares himself the subject of his own understanding, but this merely makes explicit the wider claim to authorship that takes place whenever a text is stated to be by someone and assumed to be understandable to the extent that this is the case. Which amounts to saying that any book with a readable title-page is, to some extent, autobiographical.[32]

A position polemical to de Man's is represented by Philippe Lejeune, who treats autobiography as a supra-genre category belonging to non-fiction prose.[33] According to him,

> Autobiographies are not objects of aesthetic consumption, but social means of interpersonal understanding. This understanding has several dimensions: ethical, emotional, referential. The autobiography was created to pass on universal values, sensitivity to the world, unknown experiences – and this within the framework of personal relations, perceived as authentic, non-fictional.[34]

The French researcher offers a definition of what autobiography is, referring to the identity of the author: "Retrospective prose narrative written by a real person concerning his own existence, where the focus is his individual life, in particular the story of his personality."[35] He lists four conditions of autobiography, namely: the form of language (retrospective story in prose), the subject (individual life or the story of a personality), the situation of the author (the author

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[32] P. de Man, Autobiography as De-facement, *Comparative Literature*, 1979, 94(5), pp. 921–922.

[33] In addition to the study of published autobiographies (including the diary of Anne Frank), Lejeune is involved in the analysis of autobiographies and diaries that were never published and exist in their original versions. He is also the founder of the French Association for Autobiography and Autobiographical Heritage (Association pour l'autobiographie et le patrimoine autobiographique), http://autobiographie.sitapa.org/.

[34] P. Lejeune, Czy można zdefiniować autobiografię?, trans. R. Lubas-Bartoszyńska [in:] P. Lejeune, *Wariacje na temat pewnego paktu. O autobiografii*, ed. R. Lubas-Bartoszyńska, Universitas, Kraków 2001, p. 18 (English translation after: E. Rybicka, The Anthropological and Communicative Aspects of Epistolographic Discourse, *Literature and Society*, 2016, 2, p. 55).

[35] P. Lejeune, *On Autobiography*, ed. and with a foreword by P. J. Eakin, transl. by K. Leary, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 1989, p. 4.

and the narrator are identical) and the position of the narrator (the narrator and the principal character are identical). The *sine qua non* of autobiography, according to Lejeune, is the unity of author, narrator and protagonist. It is this unity that establishes a contract between the author and the reader, by virtue of which the reader accepts the accounts as true, without questioning their authenticity.[36] Lejeune calls this agreement an autobiographical pact.

According to Lejeune, autobiography can still be a reference work. The reference pact is a kind of promise the author makes to the reader rather than a *sine qua non* condition. The author promises to tell the truth, but this does not mean that everything the reader finds in the autobiography is consistent with the actual experiences of the writer. In other words, an autobiographer is not someone who tells the truth about their life, but someone who creatively expresses it. In Lejeune's terms, autobiography is more a reconstruction of life than a re-creation of it. It is supposed to provide information about extra-textual reality, the goal being *similarity* to the truth, not *probability*. Autobiographical truth is nothing more than a certain convention of writing and reading, whereas autobiography in this context is "a mode of reading as much as it is a type of writing; it is a historically variable contractual effect."[37]

According to Paweł Rodak, who uses the analysis of diaries as an example, truth in autobiographical texts is not a category in opposition to lies and falsehoods or creation. In this type of texts, we are dealing not with the truth of the text, but with the truth of the person's life.[38] The author is present in the text through what is written and through what is not written.[39] Referring to Lejeune, Małgorzata

[36] "The reader might be able to quibble over resemblance, but never over identity." Ibid., p. 14.

[37] Ibid., p. 30.

[38] P. Rodak, Prawda w dzienniku osobistym, *Teksty Drugie*, 2009, 4, p. 25. Retrieved June 30, 2023, from http://rcin.org.pl/Content/50234/WA248_66374_P-I-2524_rodak-prawda.pdf.

[39] Ibid., p. 34. Rodak lists three types of truth in a diary: "… the truth of events (historical truth), the truth of experience (psychological truth, the realm of bodily, emotional, intellectual experience) and the truth of reality (metaphysical or transcendent truth)."

Czermińska proposes to look at the category of truth in autobiographical texts as having "… a minimum of recognizable similarity or dissimilarity characterized by authenticity."[40] Authenticity refers to extra-textual reality through dissimilarity, veiling, phantasm and play. For Czermińska, "… what is fundamental is the mere recognition of similarity, not its detailed verification. In today's reading of writings containing an element of autobiography, the focus has shifted elsewhere: the question of veracity has been replaced by the question of meaning."[41]

A somewhat polemical view toward Lejeune's autobiographical pact is presented by Georges Gusdorf, a French philosopher and historian.[42] In his view, autobiography exists beyond truth and falsehood. Gusdorf sees autobiography as a document of a life, and at the same time a work of art.

> Every autobiography is a work of art and at the same time a work of enlightenment; it does not show us the individual seen from outside in his visible actions but the person in his inner privacy, not as he was, not as he is, but as he believes and wishes himself to be and to have been. What is in question is a sort of revaluation of individual destiny; the author, who is at the same time the hero of the tale, wants to elucidate his past in order to draw out the structure of his being in time.[43]

According to Gusdorf, in autobiography, the strictly literary and ultimately anthropological function is more important than the historical one. Its privilege lies in the fact that it reveals the "effort of a creator to give the meaning of his own mythic tale."[44] Talking about oneself becomes a way of searching for oneself, an act of "personal justification."[45] Autobiography is not a simple summary of the past, but "… a kind

[40] M. Czermińska, Postawa autobiograficzna [in:] *Studia o narracji*, J. Błoński, S. Jaworski, J. Sławiński (eds.), Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, Wrocław 1982, p. 226.

[41] Ibid., p. 228.

[42] G. Gusdorf, Conditions and Limits of Autobiography, transl. by J. Olney [in:] *Autobiography. Essays Theoretical and Critical*, J. Olney (ed.), Princeton University Press, Princeton 1980, pp. 28–48.

[43] Ibid., p. 45.

[44] Ibid., p. 48.

[45] Ibid., p. 39.

of apologetics or theodicy of the individual being."[46] The difficulty, Gusdorf claims, is that the autobiography is lived and acted out before it is written. Its "original sin," he says, lies in logical coherence and rationalization: "The narrative is conscious, and since the narrator's consciousness directs the narrative, it seems to him incontestable that it has also directed his life."[47] Therefore, Gusdorf proposes seeing autobiography as a second reading of experience, truer than the first one, because "it adds to experience itself consciousness of it."[48]

By enabling the work of becoming aware of one's own experiences, autobiography becomes one of the tools for learning about oneself. According to Czermińska, the question "Who am I?" includes a communicative aspect in addition to the sense of identity and the dimension of time.[49] It is directed at someone. The autobiographer addresses this question primarily to themselves, but, according to Czermińska, they do not write only for themselves.[50] One of the purposes of creating a story about oneself is to communicate—to also *meet* the reader.

The outlined views and concepts developed within the humanistic discourse focused primarily on two questions. First, can autobiography be treated as a reliable description of real life? That is, does it allow us access to real experiences? Or conversely, should it be treated in terms of creation and text? The second question concerns the genre affiliation of autobiography. Does autobiography constitute a separate (literary) genre, and does it belong to literature at all? Or perhaps the assumption of the referential nature of autobiography does not contradict the assumption that writing autobiography is also sometimes an act of creation, of imagination. Louis A. Renza proposes to define autobiography as a unique phenomenon, one that is neither fiction nor non-fiction, nor a mixture of the two.[51]

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[46] Ibid., p. 45.

[47] Ibid., p. 41.

[48] Ibid., p. 38.

[49] M. Czermińska, O autobiografii i autobiograficzności [in:] *Autobiografia*, M. Czermińska (ed.), Słowo/Obraz Terytoria, Gdańsk 2009, pp. 10–11.

[50] Ibid., p. 11.

[51] L. A. Renza, The Veto of the Imagination. A Theory of Autobiography, *New Literary History*, 1977, 9(1), pp. 1–26.

In the 1970s, James Olney formulated the theory of autobiography that expanded the concept itself beyond genre and historical boundaries. "A theology, a philosophy, a physics or a metaphysics—properly seen, these are all autobiography recorded in other characters and other symbols."[52] Olney argues that autobiography is a form of self-knowledge and that there is no significant difference between literature and other forms of expression. In this sense, autobiography is not so much a record of events as an individual way of organizing the world, and the only common feature of all autobiographies is experiencing oneself as a projection of our vision of the world.[53]

The experiences of the individual and the subjective story of their life constitute the value of autobiographical texts in the social sciences, where a kind of ennoblement has been given to many unpublished texts authored by people not professionally connected with literature. Analyzing the specifics of Polish autobiographical research, Ewa Kos writes:

> In considering the usefulness of autobiography in social research, attention has been paid to the possibility of analyzing the material in terms of various manifestations of social life, such as beliefs, aspirations, inclinations, likes, dislikes, personal ideals, complexes, family and social relationships, ties, class and national prejudices, and especially social learning, development and formation of the individual.[54]

In the social sciences, personal documents came into their own as an object of study with the publication of *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America*, a five-volume work.[55] Florian Znaniecki used for his research thousands of letters written by Polish emigrants, including the diary of Władysław Wiśniewski, a baker's apprentice from Konin

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[52] J. Olney, *Metaphors of Self. The Meaning of Autobiography*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1972, p. 5.

[53] Ibid.

[54] E. Kos, Specyfika polskich badań autobiograficznych. Geneza i rozwój do lat 70. XX w., *Teraźniejszość – Człowiek – Edukacja*, 2009, 3(47), p. 64.

[55] W. I. Thomas, F. Znaniecki, *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America. Monograph of an Immigrant Group*, Vol. 1: *Primary-Group Organization*, R. G. Badger, The Gorham Press, Boston 1918. Subsequent volumes were published between 1918 and 1924.

and a globetrotter who emigrated to the United States of America at the beginning of the 20th century to earn his bread.

Znaniecki treated personal documents as written statements which, while reporting the participation of the writer in a certain social situation, also contain the author's personal view of these situations, a description of events that took place and a description of the author's behavior.[56] He saw in autobiographical documents the humanistic coefficient, i.e., the meaning that an individual gives to things and situations, interpreting the social reality they experience and in which they act.[57] As can be read in *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America*, "… personal life-records, as complete as possible, constitute the perfect type of sociological material."[58]

The subjective story of a life contained in personal documents is, on the one hand, a source of information, and on the other hand, a testimony to a state of consciousness. Personal records are thus "a unique material that gives insight into psychic life, a pathway to access consciousness, a record of subjective experiences and the connection of personal experiences with those of other people."[59]

It is difficult today to determine who first used the term "personal documents." Ewa Kos writes that it was probably not Znaniecki, but his student, Jan Szczepański, who in 1951 wrote a text entitled *Metoda dokumentów osobistych (autobiograficznych)* [The Method of Personal (Autobiographical) Documents].[60] Jacek Leoński adds that "due

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[56] J. Szczepański, *Odmiany czasu teraźniejszego*, Książka i Wiedza, Warszawa 1973, p. 624.

[57] On the humanistic coefficient, see F. Znaniecki, *Współczynnik humanistyczny*, introd. and selection of texts by A. Przestalski, J. Włodarek, Poznańskie Towarzystwo Przyjaciół Nauk, Poznań 2011, pp. 177–192.

[58] W. I. Thomas, F. Znaniecki, *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America. Monograph of an Immigrant Group*, Vol. 3: *Life Record of an Immigrant*, R. G. Badger, The Gorham Press, Boston 1918, p. 6.

[59] D. Lalak, *Życie jako biografia. Podejście biograficzne w perspektywie pedagogicznej*, Wydawnictwo Akademickie "Żak", Warszawa 2010, p. 115.

[60] E. Kos, Specyfika… In turn, as Małgorzata Szpakowska notes, Znaniecki wrote about "human documents," and Chałasiński used the term "autobiographical statements." See M. Szpakowska, Listy w sprawach osobistych na łamach prasy, *Napis*, 2003, 9, pp. 229–236. Retrieved June 30, 2023, from http://rcin.org.pl/Content/56620/WA248_68773_P-I-2795_szpakowska-listy.pdf.

to the historical prevalence of the use of one type of source material when describing a life story, personal documents are very often called biographical documents."[61] The most important types of personal documents include letters, diaries, journals, oral histories, notes, photographs, drawings and autobiographies.[62]

To the question of what autobiography actually represents, Anna Giza gives two possible answers:

> According to the first way of answering this question, the object that autobiography represents is the life actually lived: biography. Autobiography is a subjective report on the course of life, a description of facts, events and people. The individual's reflexivity here is an addition to their real-life experiences.[63]

In the second way of answering the question about the subject of autobiography, the Polish researcher emphasizes the linguistic dimension:

> … symbols (signs) are not mere removable additions to reality, but they are the very condition for the emergence of experience and perception, forming chaotic excitations in the form of things, people and situations.[64]

According to Giza, autobiography is an interpretation of reality framed in symbols, as *it is* the product of the individual subject's interpretive understanding expressed and fixed in symbolic activity.[65] It exists through its linguistic message.

Autobiography is a kind of code in which the biographical experience is represented.[66] People write autobiographies not in some

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[61] J. Leoński, Historia wykorzystywania dokumentów osobistych w socjologii, *Ruch Prawniczy, Ekonomiczny i Socjologiczny*, 1995, 57(2), p. 123.

[62] An important methodological issue worth mentioning is that personal documents as sources can be divided into found and evoked.

[63] A. Giza, *Życie jako opowieść…*, p. 101.

[64] Ibid., p. 104.

[65] Ibid., pp. 98–99. Autobiography is interpreting the life, while biography is living it.

[66] For more on this topic, see P. J. Eakin, *Touching the World. Reference in Autobiography*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1992.

private, detached sphere belonging exclusively to the self—they do it while living in their culture. "The story of one's life does not exist independently of its representation, of the written autobiography that tells that story."[67] Autobiography does not represent something other than itself: it is a narrative made possible by language and existing primarily within language. Leoński writes that "the telling of one's own life is conditioned not only by orderly self-reflection, but also by the choice of a particular narrative construction. Narrative is an elementary way of making sense of the world around us, as well as of our own lives. It organizes and interprets our experience of reality."[68]

Giza also points out that "the creation of autobiography inevitably involves a choice, dictated by certain values, in whose perspective the past is illuminated and interpreted."[69] It cannot be subjected to purely physical observation and described objectively. Circumstances that change over time, such as new experiences and events, meeting new people or internal transformations, affect the shape of autobiography. For this reason, Giza sees autobiography not as a static description, but as a dynamic process "… within which life is understood and presented again and again—and perhaps differently."[70]

The socio-cultural context influences the content and form of autobiography. Contemporary autobiographical theories emphasize the role of autobiography as a tracing of not only individual, but also social and gender identity. Liz Stanley uses the term "auto/biography" to signify the impossibility of separating a single life from its context. This includes their global and local cultures—their roots—and personal and familial social life. Auto/biography is thus not a story about the life of an individual, but, as Stanley points out, it entails writing about others. Significantly, writing about others evokes certain references to the self:

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[67] J. Leociak, Literatura dokumentu osobistego jako źródło do badań nad Zagładą Żydów. Rekonesans metodologiczny, *Zagłada Żydów. Studia i Materiały*, 2005, 1, pp. 11–31.

[68] Ibid.

[69] A. Giza, *Życie jako opowieść…*, pp. 98–99.

[70] Ibid.

> … when writing about myself, I cannot help but make references to the lives of others. Thus, I create them and their biographies, and the image I construct contains and reflects the history of my own life and the socio-cultural position I occupy.[71]

By (re)constructing our own life/autobiography, we (re)construct the lives/biographies of others. This reciprocal relationship, between (re)constructing one's own life and (re)constructing the lives of others, takes place at the level of various codes, such as tradition, culture, experience, language, etc.[72] According to Stanley, relationships with other people shape both individual and social life, making it what it is and what it is not.

Auto/biography is open to finding new ways of constructing the subject's self and overcoming the limits of conventional writing about life. It abolishes dichotomous divisions, such as subjective/objective, private/public, self/other. It also disregards genre divisions and does not differentiate between biography and autobiography.[73] Social life and biography form an intertextual whole. Perhaps it is the case that "a single hand writes, but the self who inscribes, who is, is herself e[n]meshed with other lives which give hers the meaning it has."[74] The "I" is always something unique, and at the same time, it remains social and connected to the lives of other people, without whom this "I" (one's own unique self) would be a completely different "I."

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[71] N. Miller, Auto/biografia w badaniach nad edukacją i uczeniem się całożyciowym, transl. by Z. Sidorkiewicz, *Teraźniejszość – Człowiek – Edukacja*, 2003, 1(21), p. 122.

[72] On the network of textual connections, see M. Czermińska, *The Autobiographical Triangle…*, pp. 101–113.

[73] According to Stanley, biography and autobiography are historical genres that do not exist in a "pure" separate form nowadays. Referring to the language of Clifford Geertz, auto/biography can be called a blurred genre (encompassing both autobiography and biography).

[74] L. Stanley, *The Auto/biographical I. The Theory and Practice of Feminist Auto/biography*, Manchester University Press, Manchester 1992, p. 14.

1.2. Extra-textual understanding of autobiography

Autobiographical texts, such as journals, diaries, memoirs, autobiographies, etc., function primarily as a record. However, this record remains inextricably linked to the reality in which it is created. It consists predominately of descriptions of biographical experiences of the author, which are the essence of this type of text. The act of writing something down can concern various, even most trivial events, and yet it is "always an act knitted together with some individual, particular experience."[75] Although there are cases when writing becomes their primary life activity,[76] in general, authors of autobiographical texts exist empirically, living a "lived life" rather than a "written life."[77] Writing an autobiographical text, Paweł Rodak notes, is "an action, a practice, which has the effect of both raising the diarist's awareness of the surrounding reality and themselves, *and* impacting the diarist and their reality."[78] Writing is an action particularly in the case of an autobiographical text, when it becomes a strategy of self-construction of the subject or, as Małgorzata Marszałek puts it, one of the "cultural techniques of identity production,"[79] which turns writing *about* oneself into *writing oneself*.[80]

Writing not only affects the way the described experiences are interpreted, but it also leads to changes in the writer's behavior and attitude, which may be noticeable and experienced outside the realm of the text. Thus, one can speak of the performativity of the autobiographical text. It is a testimonial of action with words that was achieved in life's *praxis* or, in other words, in its practice.

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[75] P. Rodak, *Między zapisem a literaturą. Dziennik polskiego pisarza w XX wieku*, Wydawnictwa Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, Warszawa 2011, p. 117.

[76] Among others, the case of Henri-Frédéric Amiel and Maria Bashkirtseff, see ibid., p. 239.

[77] I refer here to the title of one of the subsections of Rodak's book (ibid., p. 239): "Explanation of Expressions," pp. 242–243.

[78] Ibid., p. 117.

[79] M. Marszałek, *„Życie i papier". Autobiograficzny projekt Zofii Nałkowskiej. „Dzienniki" 1899–1954*, Universitas, Kraków 2004, s. 59.

[80] Ibid., p. 63.

1.3. Women's autobiographical writing

Autobiography is a record of autobiographical experience, diverse in form, where the common denominator is writing in the first person.[81] Researchers point to a spectrum of variants and variations of autobiographical writing. Anna Pekaniec, for example, includes *quodlibet* and *bric-à-brac* among the autobiography subgenres. According to her, "women's autobiographical writing is exceptionally rich in interesting, original, unconventional and highly individualized genealogical solutions."[82] It develops and transforms, evolving into new forms, often intentionally distanced from the traditional ones. The current trend leads to the replacement of the concept of autobiography with terms that are not explicitly associated with autobiography as a genre, which, until the 1980s, was dominated by an androcentric perspective, and therefore focused on the male subject.[83] The publication in 1980 of the collection of essays *Women's Autobiography. Essays in Criticism*, edited by Estelle C. Jelinek, proved to be a turning point for the consideration of women's autobiographies. This book started a discussion on the distinctiveness of women's experiences and, consequently, on the need to clearly mark the specificity of women's autobiographies. In order to distinguish it from men's autobiographies, it was given the title "autogynography." Its main goal was to find and appreciate women's autobiographical texts, hitherto excluded and overlooked in encyclopedias and studies of the history and origins of autobiography. The idea, therefore, was to complement the existing canon of autobiographical texts (which included, among others, the *Confessions* of St. Augustine and *Confessions* of Jean-Jacques Rousseau) with texts written by women.[84] Another goal of autogynography

[81] A. Pekaniec, Literatura dokumentu osobistego kobiet. Ewolucja teorii, zmiany praktyk lekturowych, *Autobiografia. Literatura. Kultura. Media*, 2014, 1(2), pp. 13–28.

[82] A. Pekaniec, Nie tylko dzienniki. Oryginalne warianty kobiecej literatury dokumentu osobistego (na wybranych przykładach), *Ruch Literacki*, 2012, 4–5, p. 451.

[83] A. Zębala, Problemy autobiografii kobiecej w studiach genderowych, *Ruch Literacki*, 2005, 6, p. 539.

[84] See, among others, Mary G. Mason's work on the autobiographical texts by medieval women authors, including Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe, as well

was to develop a theory of women's autobiographies, taking into account the diversity of biographical experiences and forms of writing due to social, cultural, economic or even sexual differences.

Female authors and researchers of autobiography use various terms to describe women's autobiographical practices. In their 1998 collection *Women, Autobiography, Theory*, Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson use the term "life writing" to emphasize that self-identity does not exist in isolation from the narrative but is the result of autobiographical storytelling.[85] Proposals for new terminology allude to different accounts of identity within different social, ethnic and racial affiliations, individual experiences, cultural backgrounds and sexual preferences. In addition to the already-mentioned "autogynography" and "life writing", there is also "autography," a term for autobiographical writing by women authors who identify with feminism,[86] or "autobiographics," a term coined to emphasize the impact of the process of writing autobiography on the construction of one's identity.[87]

1.4. Features of women's autobiographical writing

Attempts to compile a catalog of common features of women's autobiographical texts were characteristic of second-wave feminists during the 1960s and 1970s, as there was focus on bringing out and

as Margaret Cavendish, who lived in the 17th century: M. G. Mason, The Other Voice. Autobiographies of Women Writers [in:] *Autobiography. Essays Theoretical and Critical*, J. Olney (ed.), Princeton University Press, Princeton 1980, pp. 207–235.

[85] S. Smith, J. Watson (eds.), *Women, Autobiography, Theory. A Reader*, University of Wisconsin Press, Madison 1998, pp. 3–52.

[86] T. Czerska, *Między autobiografią a opowieścią rodzinną. Kobiece narracje osobiste w Polsce po 1944 roku w perspektywie historyczno-kulturowej*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe Uniwersytetu Szczecińskiego, Szczecin 2011, p. 23. In the case of autography, the author's attention is primarily focused on the constitutive role of writing. "Autography thus illustrates the interpenetration of individuality, text and community." A. Zębala, Problemy autobiografii…, p. 545.

[87] L. Gilmore, *Autobiographics. A Feminist Theory of Women's Self-Representation*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca 1994.

legitimizing the voice of women.[88] Although there is now a move away from delineating the gendered characteristics of writing, it is difficult to invalidate the value of the categories attributed to women's autobiographical texts. I would like to highlight a few of them.

1.4.1. Experience

Experience, as revealed in women's autobiographical stories, became a major category of cognition in feminist research in the 1960s and 1970s. Understood as a direct source of self-knowledge, revealed at the most basic level—the level of the body, it enabled women's narratives to be rooted in their everyday world.[89] It was therefore treated as the main criterion for the reliability of autobiographical stories.

Feminism's appreciation of women's experiences has contributed to the recognition of the viewpoints of women themselves, and thus to their empowerment. Support groups and awareness-raising movements encouraged women to talk about their own experiences.

> At meetings individual women were encouraged to speak about their own experiences. Consciousness raising, as it was termed, was intended to help women to develop an awareness of their position and to take control over their own lives and aspirations. As they talked about the frustrations that they experienced in their private lives women came to realize that their difficulties were not just individual ones but arose from social conditions that were shared by others. This self-knowledge was then a springboard for taking collective actions to achieve change.[90]

Some of the stories were examples of resistance to violence and oppression, and thus acquired a political character. Dorothy

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[88] According to Maggie Humm, the term "second-wave feminism" was introduced by Martha Weinman Lear to refer to women's liberation groups in Western European countries and the United States in the 1960s, in order to distinguish this phase of feminism from the first wave, which ended in the 1920s. The main demands of the second wave were equality in the labor market, female sexuality and the right to abortion. See M. Humm, *The Dictionary of Feminist Theory*, Harvester Wheatsheaf, New York 1989.

[89] Ibid., pp. 66–67.

[90] J. Hannam, *Feminism*, Routledge, London 2007, p. 141.

Smith writes that during the meetings, women learned to discover and express their own voices. Their stories, while differing from one another, addressed a common issue, namely, "our experience as women."[91] Such meetings have proven to be an opportunity for women to manage their time and space according to their needs. Tapping into the experiences of everyday life has contributed to greater integration of women and, according to Smith, has proven especially productive in recognizing power relations within the family and society. By recounting their experiences, women produced knowledge that was absent from dominant discourses. Their experiences, unlike those of men, had so far been situated outside the public sphere—in the realm of domestic, family and everyday life—and were seen as unimportant, uninteresting and trivial.

Interest in the stories of women's lives quickly grew from fascination to a new field of knowledge: women's history. For feminist researchers such as Smith, highlighting women's experiences provided an alternative to the dominant sociological paradigms and theories of the time.

> I proposed women's standpoint as one situated outside textually mediated discourses in the actualities of our everyday lives. This is a standpoint designed in part by our exclusion from the making of cultural and intellectual discourse and the strategies of resorting to our experience as the ground of a new knowledge, a new culture.[92]

Placing the experience in the spotlight has sparked a debate about its ontological and epistemological status, with voices criticizing the ideological implications potentially associated with experience-

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[91] D. E. Smith, Sociology from Women's Experience. A Reaffirmation, *Sociological Theory*, 1992, 10(1), p. 89.

[92] D. E. Smith, *The Everyday World as Problematic. A Feminist Sociology*, University of Toronto Press, Toronto 1987, p. 107. By highlighting women's personal, private experiences, feminism challenged the scientistic approach in science, which ignored the experiences of women themselves. Rebecca Johnson points out that women's experiences were not reflected in the records of supposedly universal human knowledge. Women were excluded from historical documents, or represented in ways that did not reflect what they lived through or experienced. See R. Johnson, *Gender…*, pp. 21–37. In addition, feminism pointed out that knowledge derived from (personal) experience has gender and physical features, and therefore personal characteristics.

based knowledge. More and more attention has been directed toward issues related to the differences among women. There is an overwhelming consensus that women are not a single, cohesive group and that their experiences vary according to various factors.[93] Researchers have recognized in the way women's experiences have been addressed to date the danger of essentialism. This objection focuses on the situation in which a certain group of women, presenting their own arbitrary experiences, gives itself the right to speak for others, thereby appropriating their voices and leaving out women who have different experiences.

Essentialism implies that there is some universal essence of "femininity" or the "female body" common to all women regardless of race, ethnicity, social position, age, sexual orientation, etc. A critique of this approach provided an opportunity to explore the differences between women, while at the same time drawing attention to specific experiences in order to identify what women have in common.[94]

As the 1970s drew to a close, attempts to unify and normalize the female experience were increasingly met with criticism. Demands for the need to realize the cultural and social dissimilarity of women's experiences, whether from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds or social classes, were made by Audre Lorde, Patricia Hill Collins, Hazel Carby, Monique Wittig and Gloria Anzaldúa, among others. These authors directed attention to the experiences of women of color, those from social classes other than the middle class, or homosexual women. The inclusion of dissenting voices—voices of different women—in the debate created a crisis that triggered a series of questions, including about the "nature" of experience and the ways in which women's identities are socially conditioned, transformed and controlled. Researchers began to consider the participation and role of various types of "intermediaries" between women's identities and their experiences. They looked to culture in the broadest sense, its manifestations and transmission processes, including socialization

[93] C. Ramazanoğlu, J. Holland, *Feminist Methodology. Challenges and Choices*, SAGE Publications, London 2002, pp. 123–144.

[94] R. Johnson, *Gender…*

and education. It turned out that it is difficult to speak of experience as knowledge flowing directly from actual experience. It is because there are patterns and mechanisms of cultural and social production of experience, through which women's experiences are appropriated, organized and subjugated. Experiences are so deeply rooted in culture, in historical, economic or, finally, political contexts, that they become invisible to women and are often treated as their own, becoming subjective. As a consequence of these inquiries and discoveries, specific actions were unmasked, among them the regulation of social and political channels of transmission. An example of an analysis of how the process of political seizure of women's private experience, in this case motherhood, can unfold is offered in Adrienne Rich's book *Of Woman Born. Motherhood as Experience and Institution*, published in 1976. At the beginning of the 1980s, she contributed to the concept of experience gaining new meanings, allowing it to become a cognitive and analytical category.

Experience as a heterogeneous concept has proven to be opaque in language and firmly embedded in the contexts of culture and history.[95] The rejection of the essentialist conception of woman has opened up possibilities for analyzing experience and its role in knowledge production and its relevance to discursive practices.

Language has become a major focus of attention in post-structuralist research. The focus on language has been accompanied by caution and even skepticism toward previous views on experience, which regarded it as an authority and source of direct knowledge. The development of a new perspective on language in general, as well as the development of a new language for describing experienced reality, was fostered by a general crisis in science, which culminated at the end of the 1970s. First in literary theory and philosophy, and then in history and the social sciences, questions about the contribution of language to the construction of reality were increasingly raised. Repeated constructivist[96] voices about the impossibility of reflecting reality

[95] This is featured by Joan W. Scott, The Evidence of Experience, *Critical Inquiry*, 1991, 17(4), pp. 773–797, among others.

[96] Here I refer to the sociological concept of social constructivism, according to which reality is perceived in a subjective way; there is no objective reality (truth),

in language heralded the twilight of representation theory and the inevitable turn to linguistics. Linguistic representations ceased to be treated as a substitute for reality, and an account of experience was assigned only the status of interpretation. The relationship between experience and the language in which it is expressed was considered inseparable. The claim that the communication of experience always takes place in some language (in speech, writing, gesture, body language),[97] which itself is already part of a particular way of thinking in a particular culture, space and at a particular time, became a basic assumption. Experience is therefore primarily a linguistic construct.

The works of Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault had a significant impact on the change in the approach to language, and consequently to the question of experience and identity. Of all the new theoretical and research currents, post-structuralism and deconstruction gained particular interest from feminist authors.[98] A number of questions posed by feminists with a post-structuralist orientation concerned the discursive nature of experience, including what is actually meant by the term "experience," as well as what and who determines how it is defined. The relationship of experience to the reproduction of normative, binary categories, such as male/female, white/black, rich/poor, heterosexual/homosexual, etc., became one of the issues to which Joan W. Scott, among others, has devoted the bulk of her attention.

Scott, a social historian best known for her groundbreaking work on feminist and gender theory, questions the authority of experience as incontrovertible evidence of a connection to reality.[99] In doing so, she challenges the existence of indisputable facts. Following Foucault's thought, Scott treats experience primarily as a discursive construction.

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and the knowledge we use is socially constructed. More on this topic: P. L. Berger, T. Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality. A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*, Open Road Media, New York 2011.

[97] C. Ramazanoğlu, J. Holland, *Feminist Methodology…*, p. 127.

[98] A. Burzyńska, Poststrukturalizm, dekonstrukcja, feminizm, *gender*, dyskursy mniejszości i co dalej?, *Przestrzenie Teorii*, 2002, 1, pp. 65–86.

[99] L. A. Tilly, J. W. Scott, *Women, Work and Family*, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, New York 1978; J. W. Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History*, Columbia University Press, New York 1988.

She argues that experience cannot be separated from the language in which it is expressed because experience itself cannot be grasped: only interpretations are possible.[100] In her view, however, there is a clear difference between claiming that experience has no direct connection to reality and claiming that experience says nothing. People subject experiences to interpretations that they create in the course of specific discursive practices. And this, she believes, is what needs to be clarified: the very process of constructing experience.

For Scott, the main object of reflection is not the content of experience, but its mechanisms of production and reproduction. Since experience is discursive in nature (often meanings are the result of knowledge entangled in mostly unconscious power relations), it becomes important to look at the political sources of experience. Scott explains: "What counts as experience is neither self-evident nor straightforward; it is always contested, always therefore political."[101] The author suggests looking at experience not as a source of explanation, but as what we actually want to explain. In her view, this approach does not at all undermine the existence of real women, on the contrary: it explores how their identity was constructed. Instead of talking about women, Scott proposes to talk about the construction of femininity and what is feminine: What establishes my experience? How do I interpret what happens to me? These questions about what underlies the experience do not invalidate the discussion of its content. Quite the contrary, they expand the perspective, shifting the focus of attention away from "words reflect reality" to "the contexts and conditions of experience." In this way, it is possible to discuss both individual and collective experience.[102]

To study "women's experience," according to Scott, it is necessary to analyze the functioning of the ideological system and its categories, in other words, to try to grapple with questions about how "experience" and the subjects themselves are established through the discourse

[100] M. Jay, *Songs of Experience. Modern American and European Variations on a Universal Theme*, University of California Press, Berkeley 2005.

[101] J. W. Scott, Experience [in:] *Women, Autobiography, Theory. A Reader*, S. Smith, J. Watson (eds.), University of Wisconsin Press, Madison 1998, p. 69.

[102] Ibid., p. 67.

they incidentally co-create. The subject, after all, is not entirely passive in creating and reconstructing the experience. In Scott's view, the subject can actively participate in mediation or resist the discursive practices through which they interpret experience. Unfortunately, she leaves the question of how to actively change the discourse open, explaining that this is not the kind of question posed by a researcher. A researcher's task is to look critically at the process of historicizing experience.[103] The research method that she proposes is Foucault's genealogy, which by penetrating through the layers of experience, can reveal the ideological residues that the concept hides.[104] According to Scott, and this is a distinctive feature of her approach, particular attention should be paid to investigating those activities that lie behind discursive processes. For it is through discursive practices, which achieve their effect by happening unnoticed, that the experience and identity of the subject are constructed.

Although Scott's work is frequently cited in the literature, I rather resonate with the outlook of Dorothy Smith, a Canadian sociologist, proponent and co-creator of one variant of standpoint theory, a method of analysis that focuses on the experiences of women.[105] For Smith, a woman's standpoint does not stem from reality, which is independent of knowledge of that reality. What women know and experience as reality is socially constructed. Reality does not exist independently of human consciousness about it, but the connection between what is real, what is thought and what is experienced cannot easily be unraveled.[106]

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[103] Ibid., p. 65.

[104] J. J. Scheurich, K. Bell McKenzie, Foucault's Methodologies. Archaeology and Genealogy [in:] *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research*, N. K. Denzin, Y. S. Lincoln (eds.), 3rd ed., SAGE, Thousand Oaks 2005, pp. 841–868.

[105] Generally speaking, standpoint theories take the experience—the perspective of women themselves—as their starting point. However, Smith particularly emphasizes that standpoint theory is critical of the realist variant of this theory, practiced by, among others, Patricia Hill Collins and Nancy Hartsock. The standpoint theory method focuses on women's material lives by examining their position in the family and society and their access to material and symbolic resources. See, among others, D. E. Smith, *Sociology…*, pp. 88–98; C. Ramazanoğlu, J. Holland, *Feminist Methodology…*, pp. 64–76.

[106] D. E. Smith, Comment on Hekman's "Truth and Method: Feminist Standpoint Theory Revisited," *Signs*, 1997, 22(2), p. 393.

The author locates the female experience in the social process of knowledge construction. A woman's standpoint emerges from a woman's experience, told in a woman's words, and the act of tapping into experience "gives access to a knowledge of what is tacit, known in the doing, and often not yet discursively appropriated."[107] Another scholar, Beverley Skeggs, raises a similar argument. In her view, experience should not be treated as a reflection of reality, but neither should women and their experiences be denied the attributes of reality.[108]

> Gendered social relations and decentred subjects may be discursively constituted, but this does not mean that they do not exist. Embodiment, violence, institutionalized dominance, material resources, for example, produce experiences that are more than discourse or performativity.[109]

In a similar vein, Linda Martín Alcoff writes:

> But people live in real bodies, in real social relationships, in a real world. These realities cannot be reduced to the language in which they are expressed, or discourses through which they are constituted.[110]

To avoid a clash, Skeggs ultimately comes to a conclusion similar to Scott's. That is, she proposes to assume that it is not individual people who have experiences, but social entities that are constituted through these experiences. In this way, in her opinion, it becomes possible to treat experience as constitutive of the subject and its identity as a process.[111]

These considerations show that it is impossible to analyze experience without also subjecting it to a process of reflexification or, in other words, interpretation. "Experience is at once always already an interpretation and is in need of interpretation."[112]

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[107] Ibid., pp. 394–395.

[108] B. Skeggs, *Formations of Class and Gender. Becoming Respectable*, SAGE Publications, London 1997, p. 27.

[109] C. Ramazanoğlu, J. Holland, *Feminist Methodology…*, p. 126.

[110] L. M. Alcoff, Philosophy Matters. A Review of Recent Work in Feminist Philosophy, *Signs*, 2000, 25(3), pp. 857–858, quoted in: C. Ramazanoğlu, J. Holland, *Feminist Methodology…*, p. 134.

[111] B. Skeggs, *Formations of Class…*, p. 28.

[112] J. W. Scott, *Experience…*, p. 69.

1.4.2. Relationality

Women's autobiographical stories are often centered around other people, mostly men, and the authors' relationships with them. Mary G. Mason, analyzing medieval and other early women's autobiographies (texts by Margaret Cavendish, Julian of Norwich, Margery Kempe and Anne Bradstreet), notes that most of the authors do not mention their own lives, thinking that they are not important enough to warrant that.[113] These authors feel the need to explain "their excursions into autobiographical writing."[114] Margaret Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle, who refers to her writing as "scribbling," places her own autobiography in the margins of her husband's biography.[115] She says, "I answer that it is true, that 'tis to no purpose to the readers, but it is to the authoress, because I write it for my sake, not theirs."[116] Mason, comparing women's autobiographical texts with prototypical male autobiographies (St. Augustine's and Jean-Jacques Rousseau's), notes that

> … the self-discovery of female identity seems to acknowledge the real presence and recognition of another consciousness, and the disclosure of female self is linked to the identification of some "other." This recognition of another consciousness—and I emphasize recognition rather than deference—this grounding of identity through relation to the chosen other, seems (if we may judge by our four representative cases) to enable women to write openly about themselves.[117]

The discovery of one's self through identification with another—or others—as well as the critical self-evaluation of women's writing, has both social and psychological justifications. It is about the type

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[113] Cf. M. G. Mason, The Other Voice…, pp. 207–235.

[114] Ibid., p. 207.

[115] Ibid., p. 208.

[116] Margaret, Duchess of Newcastle, *The True Relation of My Birth, Breeding, and Life*, appendix to *The Life of William Cavendish, Duke of Newcastle*, C. H. Firth (ed.), John C. Nimmo, London 1886, p. 178, quoted in: M. G. Mason, The Other Voice…, p. 208.

[117] M. G. Mason, The Other Voice…, p. 210.

of identity attributed to women—namely, relational identity and the so-called self-in-relation.[118]

One of the first theories of generic identity development was Sigmund Freud's theory of psychosexual development. The founder of psychoanalysis created it relying solely on the experience of a boy.[119] Since he took the stages of a boy's development as the norm, he viewed the development of a girl—which proceeds differently from that of a boy—dichotomously, as a "deviation" from the norm.[120] In psychoanalytic terms, the transformation of a girl into a woman, or achieving maturity, involved accepting the absence of a penis, that is, recognizing her frailty in relation to a man. According to Freud, the lack of a penis translates into women's feelings of inferiority and a not-quite-formed "superself" (superego), the personality structure responsible for morality and adherence to social norms.

With time, Freud's argument that "anatomy is a woman's destiny" became a point of criticism, especially by women psychologists, including Jean Baker Miller, Nancy Chodorow and Carol Gilligan. The researchers noted that maturity and good mental health are implicitly associated in psychological theories with stereotypical male traits, while female traits are linked to mental immaturity and dysfunctions.

In her book *Toward a New Psychology of Women*, published in 1976, Jean Baker Miller proposed a relational theory of women's development, thus beginning a reinterpretation of previous androcentric psychological concepts.[121] Miller posited that gender inequality was

[118] "Self-in-relation" is a term pioneered by the Stone Center for Developmental Services and Studies at Wellesley College and used in women's developmental theory to describe the "I" of a person for whom the basis for defining oneself is a sense of connection with other people. The theory is based on an analysis of the mother-child relationship. Mothers strengthen relational predispositions in daughters (by encouraging them to "learn to listen" and show empathy), thereby fostering the development of the relational self, while eliminating these predispositions in sons. More: M. Westkott, Feminist Criticism of the Social Sciences, *Harvard Educational Review*, 1979, 49(4), pp. 422–430, in particular pp. 427–432.

[119] S. Freud, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, transl. by J. Strachey, Basic Books, New York 1962.

[120] S. Freud, Female Sexuality [in:] idem, *Collected Papers*, Vol. 5, Hogarth Press, London 1950, pp. 252–272.

[121] J. Baker Miller, *Toward a New Psychology of Women*, Beacon Press, Boston 2012.

responsible for the devaluation of traits identified with women, among which she included the need for affiliation and bonding with other people. These traits are formed in early childhood through the child's interaction with the mother.[122]

The development of this concept was undertaken by Nancy Chodorow, who pointed to the role of the immediate environment, especially the mother, in the formation of psychosexual identity of both women and men.[123] The differences between men and women do not stem solely from anatomy. According to Chodorow, women's affiliative or, to put it another way, relational self comes from the nature of parental care. Women have always been responsible for taking care of and raising children, so their identity develops in relation to their relationships with other people. The early upbringing environment is different for girls and boys; socialization proceeds differently in both cases: girls are taught sensitivity and empathy whereas boys are taught assertiveness and independence. These processes are reflected, among other things, in children's play: girls learn to care for others and cooperate and boys learn to compete and think abstractly.

According to Chodorow, different socialization in the case of girls and boys leads to different personality types and as a result, she states, "in any given society, feminine personality comes to define itself in relation and connection to other people more than masculine personality does."[124] An attitude of empathy is built into the definition of a girl's self, while a boy's self, by contrast, is defined through individualization. Chodorow derives gender differences in the formation of girls' and boys' identities from the relationship with the mother. For boys, the basis for achieving masculinity is separation from the mother, while for girls, the question of femininity and identity is not dependent on separation from the mother. "Since masculinity is defined through separation while femininity is defined through

[122] M. Westkott, Feminist Criticism…, p. 425.

[123] N. Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering. Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender*, University of California Press, Berkeley 1978.

[124] N. Chodorow, Family Structure and Feminine Personality [in:] *Woman, Culture, and Society*, M. Z. Rosaldo, L. Lamphere (eds.), Stanford University Press, Stanford 1974, p. 44.

attachment, male gender identity is threatened by intimacy while female gender identity is threatened by separation."[125]

Building on the work of Miller and Chodorow, Carol Gilligan advanced further theses on the psychological development of women by focusing particularly on the issue of moral development. Analyzing psychological theories of development, Gilligan demonstrated that their founders (including Sigmund Freud, Jean Piaget, Erik Erikson and Lawrence Kohlberg) identified human development primarily with male human development. Women's experiences were not taken into account in these studies, so later findings were interpreted to the disadvantage of women in the sense that they were seen to have various developmental deficits. "Thus, when women do not conform to the standards of psychological expectation, the conclusion has generally been that something is wrong with the women."[126] The problem, however, was never a female developmental anomaly, but ignorance and lack of knowledge about women's psychological development.

In her research, Gilligan showed that for girls and women, moral judgments are made according to a set of imperatives: a different voice, different from the set used by men and boys. This set of feminine imperatives is formed primarily by the obligation to care and exercise responsibility, whereas the masculine set is formed by the obligation to respect the rights of others and to apply the principles of justice. However, the care for others and the relationships with them manifested by women is socially depreciated. Women's personality is reduced to an object that serves others, gaining value only by satisfying the needs of others.

As early as 1929, Virginia Woolf, in an essay titled *A Room of One's Own*, wrote that women live in a world where male values prevail.[127] In this world, women learned not to hear themselves.

> Choices not to speak are often well-intentioned and psychologically protective, motivated by concerns for people's feelings and by an awareness

[125] C. Gilligan, *In a Different Voice. Psychological Theory and Women's Development*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA 1982, p. 8.

[126] Ibid., p. 14.

[127] V. Woolf, *A Room of One's Own and Three Guineas*, Vintage Books, London 1996.

> of the realities of one's own and others' lives. And yet by restricting their voices, many women are wittingly or unwittingly perpetuating a male-voiced civilization and an order of living that is founded on disconnection from women.[128]

The roles entrusted to women are nurturers, caregivers and helpers, roles that do not enjoy social recognition. From an early age, women were (and still are) taught to question their own worth and to conform to the demands and expectations of the men who place themselves in the role of subject and authority.

> The same deference to the values and opinions of others can be seen in the judgments of twentieth century women. The difficulty women experience in finding or speaking publicly in their own voices emerges repeatedly in the form of qualification and self-doubt, but also in intimations of a divided judgment, a public assessment and private assessment which are fundamentally at odds.[129]

Those traits that are the opposite of male traits—including empathy, sensitivity or concern for others—are considered typical of women. According to Gilligan, sensitivity to the needs of others and overlooking one's own come not only from the social role that patriarchy imposes on women, but also from women's moral concern.[130] "Sensitivity to the needs of others and the assumption of responsibility for taking care lead women to attend to voices other than their own and to include in their judgment other points of view."[131] Women are more likely to give up self-expression and suppress their voice.

> Thus men and women tacitly collude in not voicing women's experiences and build relationships around a silence that is maintained by men's not knowing their disconnection from women and women's not knowing their dissociation from themselves.[132]

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[128] C. Gilligan, *In a Different Voice…*, pp. x–xi.

[129] Ibid., p. 16.

[130] According to Gilligan, ethical thinking takes different forms in men and women. Focusing on the care and moral development of children, women treat morality in terms of relationships between people and responsibility.

[131] C. Gilligan, *In a Different Voice…*, p. 16.

[132] Ibid., p. xx.

In her research, Gilligan assumed that the key to understanding the psychological, social and cultural order—and also a measure of mental health—is understanding how women and men talk about their own lives. In the case of women, this is important because their socialization is a preparatory process for privatizing their own experience and even renouncing their own needs. They trade in their own aspirations and needs in return for societal perceptions of femininity. Hence the call for freeing the voice of women. This is how Gilligan explains what a voice is: "To have a voice is to be human. To have something to say is to be a person. But speaking depends on listening and being heard; it is an intensely relational act."[133]

1.4.3. "The personal is political"

The slogan "the personal is political" refers to the division of life into private and public spheres. "Personal" encompasses home and family life and intimate relationships, while "political" includes the sphere of production, political power and culture.

The division between private and public spheres originated in ancient Greece where, as Hannah Arendt writes, the space of political activity—the *polis*—belonged to men and was inaccessible to women, who were deprived of political rights.[134] Women and slaves, being representatives of the animal species, according to Aristotle, were assigned the sphere of the household, depreciated and hidden from public view.[135] This division, which has been sustained for centuries, fosters gender inequality: men reside and dominate in the public sphere, while women are identified primarily with the private sphere, the home and family.

Embedded in the division between the masculine public sphere and the feminine private sphere is another division; that between culture and nature. Culture—like that which is public—is identified

[133] Ibid., p. xvi.

[134] H. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1958.

[135] Aristotle, *Aristotle's Politics. Writings from the Complete Works: Politics, Economics, and the Constitution of Athens*, ed. and transl. by J. Barnes, Princeton University Press, Princeton 2016.

with the male, while nature—more involved in the life of the species, mainly through the female body—is identified with the female. In the article *Is Female to Male as Nature Is to Culture?*, Sherry B. Ortner points out the various levels of placing women closer to nature and the consequences of doing so. First, a woman's body, having the ability to give birth, makes her closer to nature as a symbol of the source of life. "Her body and its functions, more involved more of the time with 'species life,' seem to place her closer to nature, as opposed to men, whose physiology frees them more completely to the projects of culture."[136] Second, the body and its reproductive functions determine a woman's specific social roles: nurturer and caregiver, and therefore roles that are performed in the home, in the private sphere. Another issue is the female psyche. Gender traits result not only from biology, but also from socialization: children are prepared from an early age to reproduce masculine or feminine traits and social roles. Lastly, the division between culture and nature also includes the value system. A woman's world is determined by the qualities and roles ascribed to her, so it is a world that primarily fosters values such as motherhood, care and responsibility—private, relationship-related values that are not useful in the public sphere.

The slogan "the personal is political," behind which was the demand to incorporate the private into the public sphere, was first used by Carol Hanisch in 1969. Hanisch pointed out that what is private is never "just" private. On the contrary, it relates to broader political contexts, such as the division of labor and roles in the family, among others. Personal experiences are linked to the social, economic or political situation. An example is work and wages of men and women.

> Women's work is not only paid less but enjoys less prestige. The same is true of feminized professions. At the same time, women's work at home, doing housework, taking care of children are not commonly treated in terms of work, but rather as "doing nothing," regardless of whether a woman is gainfully employed outside the home. This is accompanied by the traditional

[136] S. B. Ortner, Is Female to Male as Nature Is to Culture?, *Feminist Studies*, 1972, 1(2), p. 12.

> division of roles in the family: women are still responsible for most of the housework and raising children.[137]

Like unpaid domestic work, violence experienced by women is an important social and political problem, as its solution requires the intervention of specific state institutions.[138]

In their book *Women's Ways of Knowing*, Mary Field Belenky, Blythe McVicker Clinchy, Nancy Rule Goldberger and Jill Mattuck Tarule write that "All women grow up having to deal with historically and culturally engrained definitions of femininity and womanhood—one common theme being that women, like children, should be seen and not heard."[139] Drawing on their personal experiences provides an opportunity to reach previously unspoken or suppressed voices.

Recognizing women and making their voices heard, and through this also valuing them, leads to breaking the peculiar culture of silence that has covered many areas of the lives of individual women and their presence as a social group in public life.

1.4.4. Writing as an empowerment strategy

Of particular importance in the case of this book is the consideration of the autobiographical text as a space for self-work, self-discovery and, ultimately, self-subjectivity. Writing autobiographies can be seen as one of the emancipatory activities, enabling women to create their own space, independent of others, where they can express themselves freely, that is, speak with their own voice.

Writing as a creative activity involves the transformation of thoughts, which are abstract entities, into visible, material representations. Thus, it is a dynamic, processual act and even spatial activity. Writing an autobiographical text is a process of translating certain thoughts

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[137] I. Desperak, Stereotypy ról kobiet w reklamie telewizyjnej i praktyce rynku pracy, *Acta Universitatis Lodziensis. Folia Sociologica*, 2001, 29, p. 13.

[138] C. Hanisch, The Personal Is Political [in:] *Notes from the Second Year. Women's Liberation. Major Writings of the Radical Feminists*, S. Firestone, A. Koedt (eds.), Radical Feminism, New York 1970, pp. 76–78.

[139] M. Field Belenky et al., *Women's Ways of Knowing. The Development of Self, Voice, and Mind*, BasicBooks, New York 1997, p. 5.

and reflections—the results of biographical work—into linguistic representations. By expressing herself through the text, the woman writer marks her presence, realizes her "self" in the form of a concrete, material story. This is significant because women's voices have been absent from history for a very long time. Women were denied the right to speak with their own voice, and therefore to self-determination. One's own voice is therefore nothing less than

> … the ability and opportunity to express their interests in public space by groups previously excluded from that space by existing legal provisions or social customs, namely women, racial and ethnic minorities, the proletariat and sexual minorities.[140]

Giving oneself the right to speak with one's own voice—speaking as one's "self"—is a fundamental element in the process of *self-empowerment*.

[140] A. Mrozik, s.v. Własny głos [in:] *Encyklopedia gender. Płeć w kulturze*, M. Rudaś-Grodzka et al. (eds.), Czarna Owca, Warszawa 2014, p. 571.

2. Biographical work as a tool for self-empowerment

The purpose of this chapter is to show the emancipatory and developmental potential of autobiography. Referring to selected concepts, I will discuss the importance of self-reflexivity in the course of biography. Next, I will try to put biography and *Bildung* into the overarching category, which for me is biographical work. Let me begin by identifying the practical context of autobiography, namely, "action with words," which can illustrate the emancipatory dimension of autobiography.

2.1. Autobiography as a practice of living

Autobiography is primarily a record: a text (journal, diary, memoir, etc.). The act of writing something down can be about various, even most trivial events, and yet it is "always an act knitted together with some individual, particular experience."[141] Writing an autobiographical text, Paweł Rodak notes, is "an action, a practice, which has the effect of both raising the diarist's self-awareness of the surrounding reality and themselves, *and* impacting the diarist and their reality."[142] The essential function of (writing) autobiography "… is not to give the word a specific, textual form, but to act with the word by writing it down."[143] The most prominent example of this appears to be the shaping of one's own development.

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[141] P. Rodak, *Między zapisem a literaturą…*, p. 117.
[142] Ibid.
[143] Ibid., p. 33.

Outlining the definitional scope of the concept of biography, Danuta Lalak states that in addition to the meaning, "description of life" (biography as a text), one can also point to an understanding of biography that directly refers to "real life." Biography, in the latter sense, is equated with life (a life story or a course of life).[144] Biography understood as a text (the narrated biography) is distinguished from biography as real life (the lived biography) by its approach to time. The former has a retrospective character, focusing on events already experienced, while the latter is oriented to the future. This prospective attitude toward one's own biography makes life a task.

The task set by one's own biography is particularly relevant in the context of *Bildungsprozess*, the process of individual development seen as the realization of subjectivity or, as Arnold-Michael Nohl expressed it, the transformation of life orientations (*Transformation von Lebensorientierungen*).[145] Theodor Schulze writes about the developmental dimension of biography in the context of *Bildungsprozess*.[146] According to him, we can talk about two important processes: biographization and biographicity. Biographization refers to the individual process of assigning and organizing meanings and perceptions so that in the tide of new experiences, the past, present and future reconnect and become coherent in the project of life. Biographicity, on the other hand, directly refers to a person's ability to design their own life depending on the context and situation, each time telling their story anew. This notion appears in the concepts of German-language researchers Martin Kohli and Peter Alheit. Kohli treats biographicity as a narrative of personal potential—a person's ability to learn, while Alheit understands the term as the ability to incorporate new content and knowledge.

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[144] D. Lalak, *Życie jako biografia…*, pp. 105ff.

[145] A.-M. Nohl, *Bildung und Spontaneität. Phasen biographischer Wandlungsprozesse in drei Lebensaltern. Empirische Rekonstruktionen und pragmatistische Reflexionen*, Budrich, Opladen 2006.

[146] T. Schulze, Biographieforschung in der Erziehungswissenschaft [in:] *Handbuch Erziehungswissenschaftliche Biographieforschung*, H.-H. Krüger, W. Marotzki (eds.), VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, Wiesbaden 2006.

2.2. Biographicity as an emancipatory and developmental potential

The set of characteristics traditionally responsible for identity—a relatively fixed and unchanging construct that consisted of, among other things, origin, gender, nationality, membership in certain groups, etc.—has receded as a result of rapid 20th-century cultural and technological changes, the development of social mobility and migration processes. It became "… more variable for both the individual as well as for whole groups in society."[147] This means that it is no longer enough to present who one "is"; the individual must explain how they have "come to be" who they are today, as Alheit puts it.

> The "gap between origin and fate," which has become part of the common experience of the modern individual, can be in some sense "remedied" through the construction of a biography.[148]

According to Alheit, biography arises from a specific social and historical context.[149] It is not so much a sequence of events and facts, but rather a social form of self-construction and self-projection. "It consists also of the subjective meaning, the experiences and stories associated with a life course."[150] Alheit calls the accumulation and ordering of experiences as part of a life history, during which a person independently creates their own patterns of learning and acquiring knowledge, biographicity.[151] It encompasses both the construction and reconstruction of life; it is, generally speaking, the ability to design it. Biographicity is the process of reflectively "… organizing one's experience in a way that gives individual biography congruence, a sense of identity and meaning, and in a way that creates a communicable, socially viable life perspective that guides one's

[147] P. Alheit, The Concept of "Biographicity" as Background Theory of Lifelong Learning?, *Dyskursy Młodych Andragogów*, 2018, 19, p. 11.
[148] Ibid.
[149] Ibid., p. 9.
[150] Ibid., p. 10.
[151] Ibid., p. 15.

actions."[152] Agnieszka Bron emphasizes that "biographicity means that we can design and redesign our own lives in a new situation and a different context each time we tell our own story anew. In this sense, life appears as something that can be created and developed."[153] In turn, Knud Illeris notes,

> In the present context it is important to be aware that biographicity is something that concerns how we perceive and interpret our lives in relation to the opportunities we have and the choices we make. For in this lies also the fact that biographicity can be understood as an overall framework for learning through reflexivity, which after the breakdown of the external traditional norm-oriented framework, holds the individual's self-comprehension and identity together.[154]

In conclusion, biographicity as a concept is the sum of personal development and reflexivity when it comes to perceiving and interpreting the way we choose to live our own lives. Through reflection and the telling of our own story, to ourselves and others, we make order of reality and give meaning to our actions and thoughts. As one recognizes one's own capabilities and the potential of (un)lived life, it begins to appear more like a challenge than a struggle.[155]

2.3. *Bildung*: self-improvement and biography

Bildung is another important category after biographicity, as it refers to the processes of self-reflexivity and self-development in the course of biography.

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[152] A. Kławsiuć-Zduńczyk, *Poradnictwo całożyciowe jako element wsparcia w edukacji dorosłych*, Wydawnictwo Adam Marszałek, Toruń 2014, p. 38.

[153] A. Bron, Rozumienie uczenia się w teoriach andragogicznych, *Teraźniejszość – Człowiek – Edukacja*, 2006, 4(36), pp. 7–35.

[154] K. Illeris, *The Three Dimensions of Learning. Contemporary Learning Theory in the Tension Field Between the Cognitive, the Emotional, and the Social*, transl. by D. Reader, M. Malone, Krieger Publishing Company, Malabar 2004, pp. 96–97.

[155] A. Bron, Biograficzność w badaniach andragogicznych, *Dyskursy Młodych Andragogów*, 2009, 10, p. 42.

The German idea of *Bildung* involves shaping, forming and building a full and mature personality.[156] However, attempts to translate the term literally into English cannot fully convey the sense it has in German. The very root of the word, "Bild," has a broad meaning, including image, reflection, echo or "a representation of something."[157] Initially, it was only used in the context of theology. The term *Bildung* began to be more widely used in the 18th century. Thanks to Immanuel Kant, among others, it became the centerpiece of the Enlightenment program, which postulated "human being's emergence from his self-incurred minority."[158] Another slogan of the Enlightenment, "Have courage to make use of your own understanding,"[159] is linked to the idea of *Bildung* as a process of "continuous intellectual formation, formation of personality, and upbringing of a noble individual with a view to his usefulness in society."[160] Formulated as an emancipatory strategy critical of education, in which the origins were linked to human development, the process of becoming was to be primarily the individual's own practice. Such an idea of *Bildung* inspired Wilhelm von Humboldt,[161] who in 1810 founded the University

[156] Werner Jaeger places the category of *Bildung* within such semantic areas as education, formation, guiding. W. Jaeger, *Paideia. The Ideals of Greek Culture*, Vol. 1: *Archaic Greece. The Mind of Athens*, transl. by G. Highet, 2nd ed., Oxford University Press, New York 1986, p. xxiii.

[157] M. Janion, M. Żmigrodzka, Bildung i Bildungsroman [in:] eidem, *Odyseja wychowania. Goetheańska wizja człowieka w „Latach nauki i latach wędrówki Wilhelma Meistra"*, Aureus, Kraków 1998.

[158] I. Kant, An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment? (1784) [in:] *Practical Philosophy*, M. J. Gregor (ed.), Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1996, p. 17. However, the meaning of *Bildung* cannot be narrowed down exclusively to the so-called Enlightenment project of modernity, represented in the works of German Enlightenment philosophers (including Immanuel Kant, Friedrich Schiller, Wilhelm von Humboldt).

[159] Ibid.

[160] K. Bałżewska, Czarny wariant „Bildung". O relacjach między „Czarodziejską górą" Thomasa Manna a „Szpitalem Przemienienia" Stanisława Lema, *Pamiętnik Literacki*, 2012, 103(1), pp. 111–128. Retrieved June 30, 2023, from https://rcin.org.pl/Content/63704/PDF/WA248_81694_P-I-30_balzewska-czarny_o.pdf.

[161] "The true goal of man, not the one established by a changeable inclination, but the one established by eternal and unchanging reason, is the highest and most proportional training (*Bildung*) of his forces toward completeness. The first and

of Berlin, guided by the principles of (self-)education and freedom in education.[162]

At a similar time (during the Age of Enlightenment), the genre of *Bildungsroman*—novels about the process of becoming—appeared in literature. Its main themes were maturity, autonomy, morality and aesthetic sensitivity. An example of *Bildungsroman* is Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's novel entitled *Wilhelm Meister*. According to Maria Janion and Maria Żmigrodzka, the novel opens a philosophical and pedagogical discussion about self-education and formation.[163]

The idea of *Bildung* echoes other concepts, including *paideia*, *artes liberales*, the humanities, or even liberal education. This is because of the broad understanding of *Bildung* as a vision of (self-)education that expands cognitive horizons and shapes personality. However, the fact that it establishes the pursuit of perfection as a goal makes it a utopian construct.

The Enlightenment idea of *Bildung* is still invoked in contemporary concepts of lifelong education and adult education, e.g., in the European Association for the Education of Adults' Bildung project:

> Bildung is envisaged as an individual maturing process that combines education, knowledge, upbringing, and developing one's character. It refers to the abilities that one needs to participate in society and includes the ability to join and serve a group as well as being uniquely you and standing up for what you believe, even when the group disagrees.[164]

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inalienable condition for such education is freedom," Humboldt wrote in *Ideen zu einem Versuch, die Gränzen der Wirksamkeit des Staats zu bestimmen* (Trewendt, Breslau 1851, p. 9). Quoted after: P. Sosnowska, Idea niemieckiego uniwersytetu. Mit Humboldta?, *Teraźniejszość – Człowiek – Edukacja*, 2012, 4(60), p. 130.

[162] For an example of the ideal of *Bildung* realized through a person's development, consider Leonardo da Vinci, who did not receive a formal university education, but nevertheless became one of the most prominent representatives of the Renaissance. He was a painter, architect, sculptor, philosopher, mathematician, inventor, engineer and even anatomist.

[163] Its publication in 1795–1796 also began the tradition of combining *Bildung* with biographical experiences. For more on *Bildung* in Goethe's novel, see M. Janion, M. Żmigrodzka, *Odyseja wychowania…*

[164] C. Cieslak, Democracy and Bildung—A European Concept, *EPALE Blog*, 1 August 2022. Retrieved June 30, 2023, from https://epale.ec.europa.eu/en/blog/democracy-and-bildung-european-concept.

In this concept of *Bildung*, it is a process that has no end. It is not only individual, but also collective, connecting different generations and different cultures, and constituting an area of tension between tradition and social change. However, its basic, idealized features still influence the humanities view of individual and societal development.

A close relationship exists between *Bildung* and autobiography. Autobiography provides opportunities for self-reflection and growth. Likewise, *Bildung* takes place through conscious learning and reflexivity. This kind of effort is meaningful when it is undertaken of one's own accord, and therefore develops from the inside to the outside. The goals of *Bildung* are self-development, independent thinking and intellectual emancipation, to allow self-empowerment and conscious participation in society.

Autobiography, understood as the story of one's own life, can provide a space for *Bildung*—a lifelong process of development and self-empowerment. However, the opposite situation is also possible: working on one's own development may open the way to autobiography.

2.4. Biographical work in the context of self-empowerment

Biographical work—a concept introduced into the discourse of social sciences by Anselm Strauss and developed in the field of sociology—is an effort made by an individual to reflect on their biographical experience.[165] It is a reconstruction of the biography and an attempt to give it a new shape, taking into account certain limitations and new circumstances. Therefore, it involves a rethinking of the concept of the self, while maintaining a sense of personal integrity. Strauss described the workflow for biography, focusing on the example of suffering from a chronic illness. He distinguished four separate (analytically distinct) but simultaneously overlapping and interrelated biographical processes: contextualizing, coming to terms, reconstituting

[165] A. L. Strauss, *Continual Permutations of Action*, AldineTransaction, New Brunswick 2008.

identity and recasting biography. "Contextualizing" means integrating a new experience into a biography, while "coming to terms" is defined as "arriving at some degree of understanding and acceptance of the biographical consequences of actual or potential failed performances."[166] The next process in biographical work—"reconstituting identity"—involves "reintegrating identity into a new conceptualization of wholeness around the limitations in performance," and the last—"recasting biography"—is the reformulation of the biography, consisting in determining its new direction. According to Strauss's approach, there is no biography without biographical work. Although biographical work is a process that tends to be triggered when something traumatic happens, it is not only traumatic events that "foster" this type of work. Biographical work can take place in different contexts of interaction with the self and be driven by different motives. Above all, however, it involves the need to organize biographical experiences and give a sense of coherence to one's life. The story of one's own biography serves this purpose. Biographical work thus proceeds as a result of reflection on one's own life and often takes place during the process of telling or writing an autobiography.

> Each person's account of his life, as he writes or thinks about it, is a symbolic ordering of events. The sense that you make of your own life rests upon what concepts, what interpretations, you bring to bear upon the multitudinous and disorderly crowd of past acts.[167]

On the basis of narrative interviews and analyzing the course of biographical work through examples of trajectories of suffering according to Strauss, Gerhard Riemann and Fritz Schütze affirmed that it is "the work of recalling, rehearsing, interpreting, and redefining, and this involves the communicative work of fellow interactants, especially significant others."[168] The goal of this work is always to transform the individual's relationship with themselves, to try

[166] Ibid., p. 99.

[167] A. L. Strauss, *Mirrors and Masks. The Search for Identity*, Routledge, New York 1969, p. 147.

[168] G. Riemann, F. Schütze, "Trajectory" as a Basic Theoretical Concept for Analyzing Suffering and Disorderly Social Processes [in:] *Social Organization and*

to achieve a coherent image of the self and to assign meanings to past events. Biographical work is defined in a similar vein by Kaja Kaźmierska, who considers it an effort

> … to interpret biographical experience in relation to one's own identity, self-image, behaviors and activities undertaken or not. The work on biography continues throughout life, but becomes more intense when a person is subjected to difficult experiences … One circumstance that intensifies this work may be the need that arises at a particular point in the life cycle to give coherence to the entire biography.[169]

This effort is conditioned by the socio-cultural context, which can be, as Riemann and Schütze emphasize,

> … a serious illness, an occupational career, a phase of exams, a creation of an artwork, a love affair; in short, everything that shapes a person's life and is formed as a story of personal events occurring in the everyday life course.[170]

Biographical work allows one to gain insight into one's own biography, determine its meaning and relate it to one's own identity. It is thus coupled with identity work, which involves the formation of a self-concept.[171]

Agnieszka Bron assumes that the struggle with identity in the process of biographical work sets in motion two further processes: "floating," the sense of being fragmented, and "anchoring," the sense of belonging to a particular context, or "being in oneself."[172] Floating is "a process in which the struggle turns into a sense of being powerless, with no way

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Social Process. Essays in Honor of Anselm Strauss, D. R. Maines (ed.), Aldine de Gruyter, New York 1991, p. 339.

[169] K. Kaźmierska, Między pamięcią zbiorową a biograficzną. Podróże do miejsc urodzenia izraelskich Żydów [in:] *Pamięć zbiorowa jako czynnik integracji i źródło konfliktów*, A. Szpociński (ed.), Wydawnictwo Naukowe "Scholar," Collegium Civitas, Warszawa 2009, pp. 34–35.

[170] G. Riemann, F. Schütze, "Trajectory"…, pp. 338–339.

[171] For Strauss, identity is a concept to be considered in autobiographical terms. See A. L. Strauss, *Mirrors and Masks*…, p. 15.

[172] A. Bron, C. Thunborg, O teoretyzowaniu danych biograficznych. Przypadek studentów nietradycyjnych, *Teraźniejszość – Człowiek – Edukacja*, 2016, 19/3(75), pp. 139–153.

to move forward or go back, in other words, finding oneself in a no-win situation."[173] Anchoring, on the other hand, entangled in the constant formation of identity, means testing the boundaries between the self and the outside world. Bron and Thunborg conclude that biographical work can prove crucial to understanding the processes of identity formation and transformation. In their opinion,

> … biographical work means the continuous construction and reconstruction of biography by telling one's own story to oneself and sharing it with others, by continually revisiting the biographical story and making surprising discoveries in its course that may result from repeated retelling, reflection and self-reflection.[174]

For Bron and Thunborg, biographical work is an essential process; the basis on which all other concepts, their properties and dimensions, can be organized.[175] So, while it may very well be a strategy for coping with difficult traumatic experiences, it is more of a conscious self-reflective process of self-discovery and understanding, which, as Strauss, Riemann and Schütze also emphasize, takes the form of a narrative: an autobiographical story. Following Bron and Thunborg, I understand biographical work as an overarching and unifying category for the various dimensions of autobiography. It appears as a condition that enables the process of self-discovery and self-empowerment, that is, the process of taking control of one's life, allowing people to act as "self-agents" who mediate, negotiate and represent their lives, both individually and in collaboration with others.[176]

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[173] A. Bron, Floating as an Analytical Category in the Narratives of Polish Immigrants to Sweden [in:] *Allvarlig debatt och rolig lek. En festskrift tillägnad Andrzej Nils Uggla*, E. Szwejkowska-Olsson, M. Bron, Jr. (eds.), Uppsala Universitet, Centrum för multietnisk forskning, Uppsala 2000, pp. 119–132.

[174] A. Bron, C. Thunborg, O teoretyzowaniu…, p. 149.

[175] Ibid., p. 145.

[176] A. Cornwall, J. Edwards, Introduction. Negotiating Empowerment, *IDS Bulletin*, 2010, 41(2), pp. 1–9.

3. The research approach

The more honed the researcher, the better the possibility of excellent research.[177]

To write is to become.[178]

The knowledge I am trying to explore is of a sensitizing nature. It comes from following certain, not always obvious traces a person leaves behind, traces in the form of words. For a feminist researcher of women's auto/biographies, which I consider myself to be, words are not only a basic tool of communication, but above all, a reservoir of meanings. For this reason, they require more than "reading." Intuition, foreknowledge, tacit knowledge and even imagination, etc., are in the case of my research not so much an aesthetic supplement as an equal source of cognition; a qualitative filling of the now famous "toolbox."[179]

The study I am undertaking, focused on a specific biography—a single case—is not subject to the criteria of objectivity or repeatability. Therefore, the basic criterion for a scientific method becomes

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[177] L. Richardson, E. Adams St. Pierre, Writing. A Method of Inquiry [in:] *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research*, N. K. Denzin, Y. S. Lincoln (eds.), 3rd ed., SAGE, Thousand Oaks 2005, p. 960.

[178] T. T. Minh-ha, *Women, Native, Other. Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington 1989, p. 90.

[179] "Toolbox" is an expression-metaphor used by Michel Foucault. It signifies the available tools (concepts, ideas, hypotheses, etc.) developed in the course of his research that can be used as needed: "All my books … are, if I may say so, little toolboxes. If people are willing to open them, to use a sentence, a thought or an analysis like a screwdriver or a chisel to make a short cut, to disqualify systems of power, not excluding those in which my books came out…, well, all the better." See Des supplices aux cellules (conversation with M. Foucault), *Le Monde*, February 21, 1975, p. 16.

the openness of the research approach. Its basic feature is self-reflexivity, which is an essential tool for ensuring the quality and transparency of the research process.

A telling sign of self-reflexivity in my case was the moment of realization that I, a researcher of women's auto/biographies, have my own personal history, which consists of my experiences of womanhood. What is more, I realized that this story is inextricably linked to my work and research interests, namely, the study of other women's auto/biographies. Therefore, I can say that the auto/biographies of other women co-create my biography and are part of my personal history.

I accept, following Liz Stanley, that the very choice of a topic or subject of research is not a neutral choice, and should therefore be subject to reflection. This choice, Stanley emphasized, is situated in a political space in which the lives of some people seem meaningful and interesting, while others do not.[180] The question of which sources and empirical materials to use is also relevant. In a way, it is a political choice because as a researcher, I make a selection of data and then interpret it from a particular point of view. Stanley suggested that already at the stage of selecting source materials and literature, we should be asking ourselves what is on our reading orbit or, in other words, which publications and authors are referenced by those to whom we refer. I treat these questions and guidelines as an essential part of the research process. In an attempt to address these issues, this chapter discusses and reflects on the adopted methodological and analytical strategy.

I have decided to analyze bell hooks's autobiographical texts for several reasons. The most important is that the subject of my research directly relates to my interests. The choice of topic, as well as of source materials, stems from my fascination with the stories of women writers, especially those who are feminist intellectuals. I am interested in women's stories about themselves, and how the space of possible answers to the question of their own identity and subjectivity changes in the course of these stories.

[180] L. Stanley, *The Auto/biographical I…*, p. 9.

The availability of research material is another important reason for undertaking an analysis of bell hooks's autobiography. The texts I analyzed were published in book form. These were existing materials, publicly available in their original, English-language versions. My situation is therefore different from that of researchers using the interview technique. "The research meeting" takes place exclusively at the textual level. My contact with bell hooks was indirect, solely through her published words.

3.1. Sources, research questions and stages of the study

The empirical data that I used in the study consist of autobiographical texts from three books by bell hooks, published over a period of less than ten years:

– *Talking Back. Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black* (1989),
– *Bone Black. Memories of Girlhood* (1996),
– *Wounds of Passion. A Writing Life* (1997).

These books are the first three autobiographical works in bell hooks's oeuvre. They contain not so much an account, or testimony, of her life as a conscious reconstruction of specific events, thoughts and experiences accumulated over the years and recorded in the form of an autobiographical narrative during adulthood.[181]

In my reflection, I do not focus on bell hooks's biography itself but attempt to identify the components that make up her own story about herself. I am interested in the individual experiences that were lived, recalled and stored in memory, and in the resulting transformation of her image of herself. Since any cognition and subsequent reconstruction of someone's biography proceeds from a certain distance and a certain stance, this book, too, remains only an interpretation of someone's interpretation of themselves. Therefore, my analytical findings cannot be exhaustive. They are just a proposal, an idea.

[181] At the time of publication of the first of the three books mentioned, the author was 37 years old; when the last one was published, she was 45.

My primary intention is to identify certain threads and paths of interpretation that require further research and exploration.

In line with these remarks, I put forward three groups of research problems:

1. The stages of biographical work:
   - What is the subject of biographical work in the analyzed texts?
   - What extent of the autobiography is being studied?
   - What experiences make up bell hooks's autobiography?
   - What does bell hooks want to remember, what does she want to say about herself, and in what language does she do it?
2. Self-image (who the author is):
   - What image of herself does bell hooks create in her autobiography?
   - How does bell hooks define herself?
   - What roles does she play as an author of an autobiography?
3. The process of becoming bell hooks in the course of writing an autobiography:
   - What constitutes the biographical potential of bell hooks?
   - What tools and coping strategies does the author use in the process of self-discovery and empowerment?
   - How does she negotiate her place in the social space (among other women and among men)?
   - What elements of Gloria Jean Watkins's biography shape her as bell hooks?

These questions serve to introduce and generally systematize the analysis rather than strictly define and thus limit it. They open up the analytical search in the next stages of the work, determined by the principle of the hermeneutic circle.

The first stage of this study consisted of a free, unstructured reading of bell hooks's texts, without any pre-determined questions.[182] Questions arose as a kind of result of this first reading. Although I took them into account during the rereading, they still did not determine

[182] The order of reading the texts followed the date of publication of the books, from the earliest to the latest.

my reading. These questions were: Who is the author? What does she say? What does she want to say? And: What in bell hooks's autobiographical story ultimately reaches me as a reader and researcher?

Stage two consisted of a detailed, multi-level reading, which I call close reading. It resulted in a matrix of quotes divided into a number of factual categories that emerged during the reading (e.g., experience of violence, relationship with the mother, etc.). On the one hand, this stage involved a semantic analysis relating primarily to the overt layer of the text, which are the events described by bell hooks. On the other hand, the reading process was oriented toward analyzing the language, narrative delivery and the social and historical context. Thus, it focused on semiotics and rhetoric, that is, the stylistic figures (metaphors) and hidden, implicit layers of the text. This multi-level reading process facilitated reaching and extracting different levels of knowledge and information.

In addition to thematic and contextual analysis, the study of bell hooks's autobiographies also included "overwriting" her texts with comments of my own, even if only in the form of punctuation marks.

3.2. Close reading as a methodological postulate

> *The problem of the relationship between another person's text (quotation) and one's own has, in the background, the problem of the relationship between the person's way of speaking and one's own (code), and even further in the background lies the problem of the relationship between the other person's experience and one's own.*[183]

In my study of bell hooks's texts, I used close reading, which involves referring to different levels of interpretation and different traditions. First of all, to the ethnographic tradition or, more specifically, Clifford

[183] M. Czermińska, Nawiązania międzytekstowe w autobiografii duchowej [in:] *Między tekstami. Intertekstualność jako problem poetyki historycznej*, J. Ziomek, J. Sławiński, W. Bolecki (eds.), Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, Warszawa 1992, p. 113.

Geertz's interpretive anthropology. Close reading is a paraphrase and extension of his methodological category of "thick description."[184] According to Geertz, to understand human behavior, one must understand the context in which it happens. For the researcher, this means analyzing the meanings and senses that people themselves attribute to their behavior under certain circumstances. Thick description is thus created through the interpretation of meanings, not the description of facts.

Thick reading of a text, along the lines of thick description, implies a certain reading procedure, which, as Joanna Tokarska-Bakir writes,

> … is to keep for consideration everything that is sometimes plucked from an ethnographic text under the pretext of redundancy, marginality, incomprehensibility, low artistic level (in the case of folklore messages) or obscenity.[185]

A close reading is therefore a contextual hermeneutic reading, in which elements normally considered marginal, trivial, unsightly, obscene, etc., are not overlooked. For the task I have undertaken, it means, first and foremost, a reading that appreciates autobiographies written by women. As Małgorzata Czermińska notes, the study of "… certain distinct features of women's autobiographies dates back only a few decades."[186] Thus, the search for answers to the questions of who is speaking, on whose behalf, and what they are saying takes on an important political significance. Directing attention to women's texts serves to legitimize their biographical experiences.

The reference to the ethnographic tradition is not the only one I would like to make here since I also see a pedagogical and ethical context in the postulate of close reading. This is how I interpret the seminar and lecture series "The Ethics of Reading and the Cultures

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[184] C. Geertz, Thick Description. Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture [in:] idem, *The Interpretation of Cultures. Selected Essays*, Basic Books, New York 1973, pp. 3–30.

[185] J. Tokarska-Bakir, *Obraz osobliwy. Hermeneutyczna lektura źródeł etnograficznych. Wielkie opowieści*, Universitas, Kraków 2000, pp. 16–17.

[186] M. Czermińska, O autobiografii…, p. 6. Cf., among others, K. Kłosińska, *Ciało, pożądanie, ubranie. O wczesnych powieściach Gabrieli Zapolskiej*, Wydawnictwo eFKa, Kraków 1999; M. Perrot, *« Mon » histoire des femmes*, Seuil, Paris 2006.

of Professionalism," initiated by Peter Brooks at Princeton University[187] in 2012. Their tangible outcome is the publication, *The Humanities and Public Life*.

Brooks writes in the introduction to this book—referring to the American social context—that the crisis of the humanities in contemporary society is a manifestation of the crisis of (American) higher education in general. However, according to him, the core of the crisis may lie elsewhere—perhaps not in the humanities themselves but in their marginalization and the increasingly lower social status of humanists and humanistic analysis and research in public life. Brooks argues that what matters, now more than ever, is the ability to critically read the messages with which politics and culture bombard people.[188] It is this ability that the humanities develop and inform.

Brooks puts forward a thesis about the importance of the tasks of the humanities for the public sphere. He refers to the category of close reading when he indicates what the humanities can bring to other areas of science and public life. He writes that interpretations in the humanities begin with the specific act of reading, then move on to larger interpretive structures and theories. The humanities cannot do without careful, analytical and self-aware reading.[189] Moreover, the very practice of reading, carried out with care and attention to the language, its contexts, implications, etc., can be an ethical activity.

In *The Ethics of Reading*, Charles Larmore points out that what can be understood as the ethics of reading is not obvious. "The phrase [the ethics of reading] has become popular in contemporary literary criticism largely through the influence of J. Hillis Miller. What it suggests is that reading is a practice that raises questions of ethical significance."[190] The relationship between the readers and what they

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[187] P. Brooks, *The Ethics of Reading and the Cultures of Professionalism*. Retrieved June 30, 2023, from https://web.archive.org/web/20180917014734/http://www.princeton.edu:80/~ereading/.

[188] P. Brooks, Introduction [in:] *The Humanities and Public Life*, P. Brooks, H. Jewett (eds.), Fordham University Press, New York 2014, p. 2.

[189] Ibid., p. 3.

[190] C. Larmore, The Ethics of Reading [in:] *The Humanities…*, p. 49.

read—books or texts in general—is ethically significant and asymmetrical, since it is initiated and performed by the reading subject. Texts "speak" only when we read them (I can read the text, but the text cannot read me). The relationship between the author and the reading subject is thus established only in and through the text. However, although the text is not another person, it was written by someone who wanted to express something with their writing. To express oneself in writing, Larmore believes, is to make oneself especially vulnerable to being hurt by others.

The relationship between reading and ethics is also highlighted by Judith Butler. However, she refers primarily to the public sphere when she explains that the humanities are now under pressure to prove not only their value, but also their usefulness, mainly for the economy.[191] To the questions: What is the value of the humanities? Are they useful? Can we measure their impact, their productivity or their gains?, Butler responds that the humanities are precisely the space where reflection and critical thinking are possible. In her opinion, the reflection on the neoliberal economy and its anti-intellectualist ideology, which is instrumentally oriented toward science, appears to be of particular significance.

According to Butler, nowadays, we overlook the fact that it is the study of the humanities, which involves familiarizing ourselves with other languages and cultural differences, that enables us to better analyze and understand a wide range of perspectives on the world.[192] The humanities develop civic-mindedness and foster engagement in public life.

> If we are to understand ourselves as not only participating in that established public sphere but engaged in the very establishing of what counts as public, then an education of the senses is required. We have to be both receptive and critical to what should be known, heard, seen, and debated

[191] J. Butler, Ordinary, Incredulous [in:] *The Humanities…*, pp. 15–30.

[192] J. Butler, *What Value Do the Humanities Have?*, McGill University, May 30, 2013. Retrieved June 30, 2023, from http://speakola.com/grad/judith-butler-humanities-mcgill-university-2013, quoted after: *Judith Butler's Commencement Address to McGill University, May 30 2013*, http://hours.tumblr.com/post/52701843800/judith-butlers-commencement-address-to-mcgill.

> within the various idioms of public life, whether they are verbal or written, visual or acoustic, architectural or haptic and performative.[193]

What impact does practicing close reading have on our social lives? According to Butler, democracy requires that we "read" not only texts, but also other cultural products, such as images and sounds.

> For as important as freedom of expression is—and it most surely is—so too it is important to know what it is we want to express, and *why*. … This means that even in the space of activism, there has to be time for reflection. And in the world of practical matters, there has to be a way to consider what we do, and why, and how it affects our world.[194]

Butler's words lead to the conclusion that in the face of the global depreciation of the humanities—including through the reduction of state subsidies and the closure of university humanities and arts departments for being supposedly unproductive and uncompetitive in a society of information and digitization—close reading becomes an ethical and pedagogical project. It is a call for critical, informed, reflective and, ultimately, responsible reading, not only in relation to specific cultural texts, but also in a more metaphorical sense, referring to the close reading of the social world.[195]

Yet another dimension of the close reading postulate is the autobiographical one. It would involve reading *ourselves*; a self-reflection on our own autobiographical resources and intellectual, creative and social potential.

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[193] J. Butler, Ordinary…, p. 16.

[194] J. Butler, *What Value…*

[195] Invoking the term "reading the world," I refer to Simone Weil and her postulate of a conscious reading of reality, in which not only consciousness (mind) is involved, but also the body. Weil writes: "The world is a text with multiple meanings. We move from one meaning to the next through work. Our body also has a part in this work, just as happens when learning a foreign alphabet, the assimilation of which also takes place through the hand, which learns to write new letters." See G. Fiori, *Simone Weil. Kobieta absolutna*, transl. by M. Szewc, "W drodze," Poznań 2008, pp. 108–109.

3.3. Feminist methodology as a framework for autobiographical research

> *Feminism is not merely a "perspective" or viewpoint on the world, not even an epistemology or a theory of knowledge about it; feminism constitutes an ontology, a different way of being in the world which is rooted in the facts of oppression.*[196]

The study of women's biographical experiences documents various aspects of reality experienced from a woman's point of view and, what is more, involves taking a personal, political and engaged stance toward the world under study. For this reason, I describe the context in which I situate my research as feminist. At its foundation is my attitude as a female researcher who not only recognizes the gendered nature of the surrounding reality, but also does not overlook it in her analytical work. Determined by internal motives, identification with feminism is my consciousness and identity stance, and in this study, it is employed as an epistemological and methodological framework.

However, in an attempt to clarify what feminism and feminist methodology are and what distinguishes research conducted from a feminist perspective, I will begin by noting that there is no consensus among researchers on a single definition of feminist-oriented science.[197] "Feminists draw from different theoretical and pragmatic orientations that reflect national contexts where feminist agendas differ widely."[198]

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[196] L. Stanley, *The Auto/biographical I…*, p. 253.

[197] The terms "feminism" and "feminist methodology" are mental shortcuts. It would be more correct to use the terms "feminisms" and "feminist methodologies" (there is no single definition of feminism, just as there is no consensus on what the methodology practiced by feminist researchers is), but the singular form has been adopted in the literature to maintain terminological simplicity. I also adopt this approach in this work. More on the terminology: C. Ramazanoğlu, J. Holland, *Feminist Methodology…*, p. 8.

[198] V. Olesen, Feminist Qualitative Research in the Millennium's First Decade. Developments, Challenges, Prospects [in:] *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research*, N. K. Denzin, Y. S. Lincoln (eds.), 4th ed., SAGE, Los Angeles 2011, p. 129.

It seems appropriate, therefore, to indicate only the generally-accepted features that mark research from a feminist perspective.

Feminist research is primarily focused on women's issues and problematizes their various experiences. The studied topics include, among other things, the material living conditions of women, their statuses and social roles; relationships with men, children and other women; attitudes toward their own bodies, the problem of identity and subjectivity; and finally, relationships with their own history. Networks of social relationships between gender and economic forces, family, sexuality, politics, science, etc., are explored. The overarching goal is to create theory grounded in women's actual experiences and language. Feminist research creates equal opportunities for women to speak out and participate in scientific, social and political arenas.

Although traditional research strategies in the social sciences, based on the positivist paradigm of science, made women the objects of study, they did not take into account their point of view. To put it differently, they produced masculine visions of femininity, affirming a vision of the world in which a woman's position was limited to the place assigned to her by the dominant male social order. The need to tap into women's experiences directly, and therefore to include everything that would make women research subjects, became a central idea of feminist research. As Elżbieta Górnikowska-Zwolak writes, feminism as a research perspective "… emerged as an expression of opposition to the omission of women's experiences in the social sciences, the invalidation of their problems, and the exclusion from public and scientific discourse by the so-called dominant discourse."[199] Additionally, Lucyna Kopciewicz stresses that feminism needed knowledge that adequately described femininity, a knowledge that was "true, its own," "related to life, not to the problems of theory."[200]

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[199] E. Górnikowska-Zwolak, Siły społeczne kobiet – pozytywna energia regionu, *Problemy Polityki Społecznej*, 2011, 15, pp. 117–137. Retrieved June 30, 2023, from http://www.problemypolitykispolecznej.pl/pdf-123297-51467?filename=Sily%20spoleczne%20kobiet%20_.pdf.

[200] L. Kopciewicz, *Polityka kobiecości jako pedagogika różnic*, Impuls, Kraków 2003, p. 28.

Feminist research, by highlighting the needs and interests of women, has changed the nature of previous knowledge and restored the value of personal experience. The emphasis is placed on discovering what the women themselves have to say and thus calling attention to the subjective experience of women as women. For this reason, feminist research emphasizes the importance of listening to, recording and understanding women's experiences and relationships.[201] As Kopciewicz explains, "… feminism's first epistemological move was to privilege the voice and methods based on listening as a specifically feminine way of reaching reality."[202]

Another distinguishing feature of feminist research is reflexivity, which is treated as a tool for ensuring the quality and transparency of the research process. The reflection can proceed in two ways:

> It can mean reflecting upon, critically examining and exploring analytically the nature of the research process in an attempt to demonstrate the assumptions about gender … which are built into a specific project. It may also refer to understanding the "intellectual autobiography" of researchers.[203]

Mary Maynard points out that the researcher is also a subject in the study. The research process—including data analysis, interpretation and conclusions—is influenced by her life experiences. For this reason, in feminist research, "… gender is seen, not just as something to be studied, but as an integral dimension of the research process and therefore also to be examined."[204] The way that leads to reliable knowledge is through the use of critical reflection and "… the researcher's relentless analysis and scrutiny of his or her own thinking patterns, as well as the public disclosure of the most

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[201] As Mary Maynard explains, "At its heart was the tenet that feminist research must begin with an open-ended exploration of women's experiences, since only from that vantage point is it possible to see how their world is organized and the extent to which it differs from that of men." See M. Maynard, Methods, Practice and Epistemology. The Debate about Feminism and Research [in:] *Researching Women's Lives from a Feminist Perspective*, M. Maynard, J. Purvis (eds.), Taylor & Francis, Abingdon 1994, p. 12.

[202] L. Kopciewicz, *Polityka kobiecości…*, p. 28.

[203] M. Maynard, Methods…, p. 16.

[204] Ibid.

deeply hidden personal conditions of the research process."[205] It is important to realize that

> Writing is not merely the transcribing of some reality. Rather, writing—of all texts, notes, presentations and possibilities—is also a process of discovery: discovery of the subject (and sometimes of the problem itself) and discovery of the self.[206]

It is a serious challenge to confront the question: Who is the writing subject and on whose behalf am I speaking as the author of the text?[207] Gayle Letherby notes that there is still a tendency in scientific discourse to not only avoid writing in the first person, but also to exclude the personal element from the scientific text.[208] On the one hand, it is a way to avoid the discomfort of revealing one's own self and one's own experiences, but on the other hand, it tells of the fear that a work in which the author "breaks with the myth of transparency" may be considered unscientific.[209]

Donna Haraway, among others, has written about the criteria of scientificity and objectivity in feminist research.[210] In her view, obtaining complete and all-encompassing knowledge that would at the same time be neutral, fulfilling the ideal of positivist social science, is unrealistic. Haraway claims that "knowledge from the point

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[205] M. Maynard, Feministyczne badania socjologiczne, transl. by K. Jaskólska-Węgierek, J. Rydzewska, *Kwartalnik Pedagogiczny*, 1995, 1–2, p. 95.

[206] E. G. Guba, Y. S. Lincoln. Paradigmatic Controversies, Contradictions, and Emerging Confluences [in:] *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research*, N. K. Denzin, Y. S. Lincoln (eds.), 3rd ed., SAGE, Thousand Oaks 2005, p. 210.

[207] Feminist researchers oppose Roland Barthes's view about the death of the author. The person of the author is not subject to "erasure," on the contrary, their role is crucial in auto/biographical research. For more on auto/biography and the postulate of the death of the author, see L. Stanley, *The Auto/biographical I…*, pp. 16–18.

[208] G. Letherby, *Feminist Research in Theory and Practice*, Open University Press, Buckingham–Philadelphia 2003, p. 7.

[209] However, the feminist call for not excluding the personal from the text is all about accountability. Writing as "I" imposes a personal obligation on the author for what she writes. See ibid.

[210] D. Haraway, Situated Knowledges. The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective, *Feminist Studies*, 1988, 14(3), pp. 575–599.

of view of the unmarked is truly fantastic."[211] Only a partial, local perspective allows an objective view. She writes that objectivity is always "looking from somewhere." It has nothing to do with transcendence and the separation of the subject from the object of study. It is knowledge that arises from looking from a particular social perspective (position); a look that does not claim to have absolute knowledge, but takes responsibility for the part of reality that it sees and presents.[212] Objectivity for Haraway means "situated knowledges."[213]

The accusation of bias is also refuted by Jennifer Brayton. In her view, traditional social research, along with the postulate of objectivity, fails to recognize how researchers' personal assumptions—their biases, views, etc.—affect the research process, from the choice of the research subject to the presentation of the results.[214] Dorothy Smith poses the question directly: "How can there be 'knowledge' that exists independently of knowers?"[215] Knowledge is the product of specific people, situated in specific places in social structures and at specific moments in their biographies. It is intersubjective, and therefore shared by people interacting with each other, during which meanings are given to experiences.

> Life is "subjective" because we necessarily see and understand through our own consciousness … but it can never be an "objective" one, for by definition it derives from particular "subjectivities." The subjective/objective dichotomy is itself an ideological product: two opposing glosses on pretty much the same thing but worked up rhetorically and presented differently.[216]

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[211] Ibid., p. 587.

[212] This is known as strong objectivity, which stems from an awareness of (one's own) place in the social space. S. Harding, Rethinking Standpoint Epistemology. What Is "Strong Objectivity"? [in:] *The Feminist Standpoint Theory Reader. Intellectual and Political Controversies*, S. Harding (ed.), Routledge, London 2004, pp. 127–140.

[213] D. Haraway, Situated Knowledges…, p. 581.

[214] J. Brayton, *What Makes Feminist Research Feminist? The Structure of Feminist Research within the Social Sciences*, 1997. Retrieved June 30, 2023, from https://web.archive.org/web/20130131172141/http://www.unb.ca:80/par-l/win/feminmethod.htm.

[215] D. E. Smith, *The Conceptual Practices of Power. A Feminist Sociology of Knowledge*, Northeastern University Press, Boston 1990, p. 62.

[216] L. Stanley, *The Auto/biographical I…*, p. 164.

3.4. The biographical method

The choice of biographical approach is thus a matter of temperament.[217]

Having established that the feminist perspective is the general epistemological and methodological framework of my study, the next task is to determine the research method.

The purpose of my research on individual autobiographical experiences is to understand the person in the process of "becoming."[218] My focus is on the emancipatory dimension of reflection on one's own biography, the developmental potential and the resulting capital of biographical experience.[219] What is interesting in bell hooks's texts is the process of her self-empowerment that is carried out through biographical work, the self-reflection that takes place in the course of writing her autobiography. I analyze her texts looking for the designators or the components of what makes up her autobiography, particular experiences of a transformative nature. These experiences, captured in autobiographical stories, are essential material in biographical research.

The basic premise and the history of the use of autobiographical materials—e.g., personal documents—in social research have been described many times in the literature. However, this does not mean that studies of this type are orderly, coherent, consistent or complete.

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[217] D. Bertaux, Funkcje wypowiedzi autobiograficznych w procesie badawczym, transl. by S. Jakóbczyk [in:] *Metoda biograficzna w socjologii*, J. Włodarek, M. Ziółkowski (eds.), Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, Warszawa 1990, p. 71.

[218] Winfried Marotzki defines the purpose of biographical research as follows: "The goal is to understand the individual person both through his or her relationship to the everyday world of life, mediated by an interpretation that gives him or her meaning, and through biographical becoming." See W. Marotzki, Forschungsmethoden der erziehungswissenschaftlichen Biographieforschung [in:] *Erziehungswissenschaftliche Biographieforschung*, H.-H. Krüger, W. Marotzki (eds.), Springer, Opladen 1995, pp. 55–89.

[219] The term "resources" means unrealized, existing potential, while "capital" is defined as resources that are or were realized. I thank Professor Catherine Delcroix for the talk on resources and biographical capital (December 2, 2017, Strasbourg).

Due to the increasingly wide scope of biographical research, the methodological terminology itself gives an impression of chaos, as it remains—despite its apparent semantic flexibility—differentiated in multiple ways.[220] Thus, the first challenge is to determine what the biographical method actually is.

Ingeborg K. Helling wrote years ago that the term "biographical method" is used "… to refer to a loosely related set of research strategies referring to different theoretical assumptions and methods."[221] In the introduction to the first anthology of texts on the biographical method in Polish sociology—which incidentally opens with a text by Helling—it is stated that the very concept of the biographical method is understood in widely differing ways: it "takes distinct forms, involving not only a variety of theoretical orientations, but also adopting different methodological assumptions and using different—sometimes highly sophisticated—procedures of analysis."[222] Conversely, Jacek Leoński simplifies the discussion by assuming that "any research (regardless of the methodological orientation adopted) in which the subject is the biography of an individual, social group, institution or social organization is research conducted using the biographical method."[223]

A kind of arbitrariness—not to say liberty—in referring to various theories, methods and analytical strategies[224] led at one point to a "large inflation of the biographical perspective."[225] Kaja Kaźmierska,

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[220] See, among others, J. Włodarek, M. Ziółkowski, Teoretyczny i empiryczny status metody biograficznej we współczesnej socjologii [in:] *Metoda biograficzna…*, p. 4.

[221] I. K. Helling, Metoda badań biograficznych [in:] *Metoda biograficzna…*, pp. 13–37.

[222] J. Włodarek, M. Ziółkowski, Teoretyczny i empiryczny status…, p. 4.

[223] J. Leoński, Różne sposoby ujmowania metody biograficznej w socjologii [in:] *O biografii i metodzie biograficznej*, T. Rzepa, J. Leoński (eds.), Nakom, Poznań 1993, p. 25.

[224] Agnieszka Bron used the word "jungle" to describe the diversity of approaches to biographical research in the social sciences and humanities, see A. Bron, O badaniach biograficznych krytycznie, *Nauki o Wychowaniu. Studia Interdyscyplinarne*, 2017, 4(1), p. 18.

[225] K. Kaźmierska, Badania biograficzne w naukach społecznych, *Przegląd Socjologii Jakościowej*, 2013, 9(4), p. 8. Retrieved June 30, 2023, from http://www.qualitativesociologyreview.org/PL/Volume24/PSJ_9_4_Kazmierska.pdf.

commenting on the theoretical and methodological diversity of research based on the biographical method and its popularity, writes explicitly about "… the chaos prevailing in this field and the increasing dominance of a stereotype based on a simplified image of the biographical method."[226] Thus, the current critique is no longer directed only at the theoretical and methodological chaos prevailing in biographical research and method, but also at the resulting stereotypical thinking about the easy application of this research method.[227] Although the belief that biographical research is not complicated is quite easily undermined,[228] it seems impossible to formulate a single epistemological thesis and a common catalog of rules for biographical research that would satisfy all researchers. Moreover, any attempt at unification not only seems ineffective, but even questions the point of biographical research, which is inseparable from the current humanistic (understanding) sociology, and therefore formed in opposition to positivism and postulating understanding as a means and tool of cognition.[229]

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[226] Ibid., p. 10.

[227] Bron writes: "Biographical research may seem easy to conduct, however, this is not the case. Planning a study requires thinking through and answering many important questions. First, what our research questions are, whether we are starting from a particular theory or not. Second, what pitfalls may await us when we undertake such research. The key issue is the relationship between the choice of theoretical approach and methodology. These are also questions of induction or deduction." See A. Bron, O badaniach…, p. 21.

[228] It seems to refer, at least in part, to another stereotype, namely, of the superior role of quantitative research and the inferior role of qualitative research, which has developed its own criteria of scientificity and methodological correctness, different from those adopted in quantitative research, which is based on a representative research sample. What strengthens and even replaces reliability (in the basic sense) in qualitative biographical research is credibility of the biographical materials, the environmental representativeness of the subjects and the credibility of the researcher.

[229] Representatives of humanistic/understanding sociology include Max Weber (who introduced, among other things, the concept of *Verstehen*) and Florian Znaniecki, author of the concept of the humanistic coefficient. In understanding sociology, the primary goal and also the tool of research is "understanding," which postulates the researcher's involvement in the research situation and their direct experience of the studied reality.

One attempt to formulate the basic assumptions of the biographical method was made by Norman K. Denzin,[230] who distinguished four such assumptions. The first stipulates that the study of human activities should, to the greatest extent possible, recognize people's subjective feelings, sensations and experiences that condition all their actions. The second assumption concerns the process of analysis, which should take into account the environmental context, since the living environment influences the subjective interpretations and meanings expressed by the individual. The third assumption relates to the various sources of information and states that all biographical data has value. The fourth and last assumption concerns the nature of biographical research, which should, in Denzin's view, be a historical monograph, that is, refer to past experiences. Learning about past experiences facilitates understanding of subjective experiences.

The original field of application of the biographical method was sociology. Helling points to the Chicago school (1930s and 1940s) as the first major center to use it. She then brings up Charlotte Bühler, author of *Der menschliche Lebenslauf als psychologisches Problem* (originally published in 1933; English translation: *The Course of Human Life. A Study of Goals in the Humanistic Perspective*, 1968).[231] Only in third place does she mention the Polish school of sociology, started by Florian Znaniecki and continued after World War II by his students, including Jan Szczepański and Józef Chałasiński.[232]

When listing the various schools of biographical research in sociology, Agnieszka Bron also mentions the Chicago school as the pioneering center. However, in her opinion, the turn to biographical research was initiated by the joint research of William Thomas and Florian Znaniecki. In later years, the Chicago school further developed

[230] N. K. Denzin, *Interpretive Biography*, SAGE Publications, London–New Delhi 1989.

[231] Bühler was a German psychologist and a pioneer of research on the course of human life. See C. Bühler, *Der menschliche Lebenslauf als psychologisches Problem*, Verlag von S. Hirzel, Leipzig 1933.

[232] Helling does not clearly indicate in which tradition (the Chicago school or the Polish sociological school) she would place the work of Florian Znaniecki and William Thomas, *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America* (American edition: 1920–1922; Polish edition: 1972).

symbolic interactionism, phenomenology and even functionalism and structuralism.[233] At the same time, in Poland—after World War II—Znaniecki's disciples developed the Polish method, which specialized primarily in the study of diaries selected through competitions.[234] Since the 1960s, the biographical method, or, more broadly, the biographical perspective, has been applied in various theoretical schools. In addition to symbolic interactionism and ethnomethodology, it became an important methodological strategy in the sociology of knowledge,[235] which gave rise to social constructivism. Since the 1970s, the biographical method has been successively applied in feminist research.

3.5. Analytical strategies

> *Most of the currently published materials on the biographical method maintain a strange silence when it comes to the methodological rules of data analysis.*[236]

The biographical method takes its name from the nature of the research material: biographical[237] documents or, simply, biographies. However, biography in the biographical method can be considered as an object of study, a means of data collection and/or a means of analysis. Helling coined two terms: "biography as a subject" and "biography as a means."

> The distinction between biography as a subject and biography as a means of social research overlaps with the differentiation of the researcher's interest directed at either the subject (the "what") or the structure (the "how"). If the researcher is mainly interested in "what" questions, they will, for

[233] Bron also points out the distinction between the more qualitative method represented by the Chicago school and the more quantitative method of the Iowa school: A. Bron, O badaniach…, p. 20.

[234] For more on diaries as a source for biographical research, see D. Lalak, A. Ostaszewska, *Źródła do badań biograficznych. Listy, dzienniki, pamiętniki, blogi, materiały wizualne*, Wydawnictwo Akademickie "Żak," Warszawa 2016, pp. 85–131.

[235] A. Giza, *Życie jako opowieść…*

[236] I. K. Helling, Metoda badań…, p. 28.

[237] It would be most correct to write: autobiographical.

> practical reasons, abstract from the interactional conditions of data production and the structure of individual meaning to construct "types of the course of events" … If, on the other hand, they are interested in questions of "how" in relation to biographical reconstruction of the life course, they will, for example, look for indicators or important motives in their empirical data and construct "personality types."[238]

Danuta Lalak argues that as a research method, the biographical method is chiefly determined by the type of analysis used and not by the nature of the studied material or the way it is collected. She distinguishes three main cognitive orientations in biographical research. The first is interpretative, based on the concept of the "lived world" and the phenomenology of source experience. In this approach, the aim of research is "… to bring out the subjective perception of the experiences of the biography's subject."[239] The second approach, called objective-analytical, seeks to study the objective meanings of events and life processes, and aims to extract from biographical materials knowledge relating to the external world. It is represented by objective hermeneutics. The third approach, derived from the tenets of ethnomethodology and ethnographic research, is documentary interpretation. Its goal is to find structures that "… generate behavior independently of subjects (the influence of external factors on the behavior of the individual)."[240]

Characterizing the biographical method as specific procedures for collecting, developing, analyzing and interpreting research materials, Kaja Kaźmierska refers predominantly to European positions. Although she emphasizes that the biographical method originated and developed in the tradition of American sociology, currently, in her opinion, "… it is difficult to identify significant achievements in this field, especially the development of methodologically consistent contemporary approaches."[241] Kaźmierska counts Fritz Schütze's autobiographical-narrative interview method and Gabriele Rosenthal's proposal for analysis (which is based on Schütze's method)

[238] I. K. Helling, Metoda badań…, p. 16.
[239] D. Lalak, *Życie jako biografia…*, p. 239.
[240] Ibid.
[241] K. Kaźmierska, Badania biograficzne…, p. 7, footnote 3.

among the analytical strategies that have been fully developed and systematized. Other important methodological developments within the biographical method also include those "… taken from Aron Gurvitch, the thematic field analysis or the BNIM (Biographical Narrative Interpretative Method), which was popularized in the British Isles and is essentially an English interpretation of the method used by German researchers."[242] Additionally, she mentions other analytical approaches developed by German scholars: the objective hermeneutics of Ulrich Overman and Ralf Bohnsack's documentary method. According to Kaźmierska, all these approaches,

> … regardless of the possibility of looking at them critically, are characterized by methodological care in the process of collecting material and an internally consistent analytical procedure, the choice of which largely depends on the theoretical perspective adopted by a given researcher.[243]

Kaźmierska concludes by referring to Daniel Bertaux and Catherine Delcroix and their research proposals based on the life story method and analysis of the transmission of family histories.

According to Bertaux, researchers are divided into those who are more interested in meaning and significance (Fr. *signifiés*) in autobiographical statements and those who are concerned with social relations and processes. He calls the former orientation hermeneutic and the latter ethnosociological.[244] Both imply different types of analysis.

Although the analytical strategy proposed by Bertaux is primarily concerned with autobiographical statements collected as part of a life story through biographical interviews, some of its elements appear useful for the content analysis of written narratives. Therefore, I will present those that, in my opinion, can enrich analytical work on any autobiographical materials. Let me begin by explaining that the life story method Bertaux uses (Fr. *le récit de vie*) has been labeled by him

[242] Ibid., pp. 7–8.

[243] Ibid., p. 8.

[244] D. Bertaux, Funkcje wypowiedzi…, pp. 71–81. According to Bertaux, the very way we collect autobiographical statements anticipates their later use. He distinguishes three functions of autobiographical statements: exploratory, analytical and expressive, i.e., the function of expression.

as "sociological," for the researcher is interested in capturing social processes and mechanisms in autobiographical materials. This does not mean that he omits in his proposal those levels and elements of analysis that go beyond his sociological interests.

Bertaux refers to the methodology of grounded theory, according to which the process of analysis begins right at the stage of collecting data. According to him, each life story, an autobiographical narrative, simultaneously provides information and indicators of phenomena at different levels: the level of the interior of the storyteller, the level of the history of enduring relationships with parents and relatives, and the sociological level, i.e., the social-structural relations pertaining to the social world.

> This division into three "levels" helps to situate the elements that the life story contains. There we find elements of description of states: each moment of the life path corresponds to a certain physical and psychological state of the subject, their "personality," but also life forces; a certain state of their strong interpersonal relationships, their network of relationships, status and social situation … Anything that significantly changes at least one of these three states constitutes an event; and vice versa.[245]

The process of transformation does not take place only at the subjective level (the level of the interior of the subject). Therefore, interpersonal relations (the level of the history of relationships with parents and relatives) should also be taken into account in its interpretation. As Bertaux writes,

> Even the most intimate "stirrings of the mind"—falling in love, religious conversion or a decision to commit suicide—cannot be understood without taking into account the strong interpersonal relations of the individual at the time.[246]

In his works, Bertaux emphasizes the role of the family environment and its diverse influence on the individual life paths of its

[245] D. Bertaux, Analiza pojedynczych przypadków (*au cas par cas*), transl. by A. Trąbka [in:] *Metoda biograficzna w socjologii. Antologia tekstów*, K. Kaźmierska (ed.), Zakład Wydawniczy "Nomos," Kraków 2012, p. 312.

[246] Ibid.

members. He also draws attention to different types of relationships and family ties: "Members of the same family group are bound to each other not only by deep emotional and psychological ties, but also by mutual moral obligations."[247] In addition to the actual story in the life story (the historical-empirical reality, or life path) and narrative (the discursive reality, or "what someone said"), Bertaux distinguishes an intermediate level—the mental and semantic reality "in one's head," that is "… created by what the subject knows and thinks retrospectively about their life path; it is the result of a reflective recapitulation of past experiences; it is not directly seen or grasped."[248] He calls this intermediate level between story and narrative the level of personal summary of lived experience. It is created from memories and through constant reflection. "It also consists of memory, reflexivity, moral judgments, joys and sufferings, as well as the subject's intellectual abilities, their cultural 'equipment,' ideology, vision of the world and their place in it."[249] In an autobiographical story, in addition to verbalized information about biographical facts—the narrative—there is a third element of the life story—the self-reflective story "in one's head"—inaccessible from the outside.

Bertaux also draws attention to the issue of time in an autobiographical story: diachrony and chronology, as well as historical and biographical time. "Diachrony refers to the temporal order relating to events and their before/after relationship. Chronology concerns their 'absolute' dating in terms of specific dates … or in terms of age."[250] When taking time into account, life events can be analyzed by considering the order in which they occurred: something happened before or after something else. Something also happened for a reason; it has a cause. Significant events and actions follow each other in a certain order; therefore, "there are 'before/after' relations between them that are as real as the events and actions themselves."[251] Moreover,

[247] Ibid.
[248] Ibid., p. 315.
[249] Ibid.
[250] Ibid., p. 320.
[251] Ibid., p. 317. As Alfred Schütz has already noted, the story combines two different types of reasons and causes: reasons because and reasons in order to.

life events happen in a specific historical context. However, it is not just a matter of inscribing biographical time into historical time. The moment of birth, belonging to a particular generation, etc., make certain historical and social events more important and better remembered than others. "The work of reconstructing the diachronic structures of the life path and inscribing them in historical time means gradually becoming aware of the influence of historical events and processes of social change on this path."[252]

An interesting category of analysis of autobiographical statements—personal resources (Fr. *ressources subjectives*)—was proposed by Catherine Delcroix. While conducting a study of Maghreb immigrant families living in France, she observed that although the "objective" resources of those families—i.e., economic capital, as well as social and cultural capital[253]—were small or nonexistent, this did not necessarily imply the absence of any resources.[254] Personal resources, or what Anthony Giddens calls practical and discursive consciousness,[255] became "capital"[256] in these families. According to Delcroix, personal resources are created in the course of intergenerational and intra-generational transmission, passed on in the process of socialization and upbringing. They include moral qualities (e.g., courage,

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A. Schütz, *Le chercheur et le quotidien*, Librairie des Méridiens, Klincksieck, Paris 1987, quoted in: D. Bertaux, Analiza pojedynczych przypadków…, p. 320.

[252] D. Bertaux, Analiza pojedynczych przypadków…, p. 321.

[253] In the sense given to the term "capital" by Pierre Bourdieu.

[254] In this type of family, the probability of children achieving success is often considered a priori low. C. Delcroix, Przekaz historii rodzinnej i pamięci historycznej w obliczu niepewności (*precarité*) [in:] *Metoda biograficzna w socjologii. Antologia…*, p. 702.

[255] Practical and discursive consciousness stands for the psychological mechanisms of recollection used in the circumstances of action. Discursive consciousness involves expressing memories verbally and practical consciousness means recall to which the social actor has access in the course of action without being able to say what they actually "know." See A. Giddens, *The Constitution of Society. Outline of the Theory of Structuration*, University of California Press, Berkeley–Los Angeles 1984, p. 49.

[256] Delcroix defines resources as something that exists in a state of potential, while capital is a resource "in motion," that is, being consumed or used to achieve some benefit or profit. Personal resources become biographical capital when they are used "outside" oneself, such as to get a job.

perseverance), intellectual qualities (reflection, analysis, strategic planning) and psychological qualities (e.g., communication, understanding or empathy). While telling their children stories about their own biographical experiences (family histories), parents also pass on to them strategies on how to use personal resources in their lives:

> … it's not just about telling the family history as comprehensively as possible. It also involves working on [memory] selection, planted in the desire to help children socialize by building their self-respect. With this parenting strategy, parents try to prepare their children to face the risk of racism or insecurity.[257]

The stories collected by Delcroix were characterized by a double series of humiliating experiences.[258] First—and common to all immigrant families—is the experience of occupying the lowest positions in society. The second experience relates to exclusion and discrimination, including on the basis of skin color, faced by people with minority or immigrant backgrounds. Because of their humiliating experiences, these families choose to keep silent about their history; "… their children are thus left alone. The onus to construct reference points for themselves falls on them."[259] According to Delcroix, parental silence can be a significant tool for socializing and raising children. "The past can also be the subject of silent suffering, which is also passed on, although children do not always understand its meaning."[260]

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[257] C. Delcroix, Przekaz…, p. 713.

[258] Delcroix writes that not all of the immigrant families she studied were able to use personal resources, and this was due to a specific difficulty common among immigrant families from working-class backgrounds: the parents' lack of skill in passing on their autobiographical stories to their children. The stories of the parents, who are often illiterate or semi-illiterate, are filled with unpleasant, embarrassing experiences that they are not only unwilling but unable to share with others. The problem is language itself. These families often do not speak the official language of the host country, or do so to a very limited degree. Another issue is that these families use a kind of "restricted code," to use Basil Bernstein's phrase. That is, they communicate using simple, short sentences with lots of gestures. This kind of language does not facilitate the development of reflexivity. See C. Delcroix, Two Generations of Muslim Women in France. Creative Parenting, Identity and Recognition, *Oral History*, 2009, 37(2), pp. 87–94.

[259] C. Delcroix, Przekaz…, p. 713.

[260] Ibid., p. 707.

Applying the category of personal resources to the analysis of biographical experiences and taking into account the level of family relationships seem helpful as well as inspiring for my study of bell hooks's autobiography and her biographical work. Before I get to that point, however, I will reconstruct and present her biography. Next, I will explain the origin of the pseudonym "bell hooks." I will then present the author's bibliography and briefly characterize the main ideas contained in her publications. A kind of introduction to the analysis of bell hooks's autobiographical texts will be a short characterization of the books from which they come.

4. Reconstruction of bell hooks's biography

The reconstruction of bell hooks's biography presented in this chapter is an attempt to chronologically organize the events and fundamental experiences of her life. It is based predominately on the data contained in her publications, with particular emphasis on the books discussed in this work.[261] I also use the information available on the bell hooks center's website.[262]

However, before I proceed with the reconstruction of bell hooks's biography, I will briefly outline the historical and social context that formed the background of the author's life, especially in the years 1952–1981.

4.1. Historical and social context[263]

The biography of bell hooks is part of a broader history of socio-political and historical processes specific to the United States of America—a federated, socially and culturally (ethnically, religiously and morally) diverse country, with immigration as a historically inherent

[261] There are no official biographies of bell hooks, aside from brief mentions in encyclopedias.

[262] The bell hooks center was created after the transformation of the bell hooks Institute in 2022: https://www.berea.edu/bhc/about/.

[263] In this subsection, I mainly refer to two studies: P. Jenkins, *A History of the United States*, Palgrave Macmillan, London 2017, and H. Brogan, *The Longman History of the United States of America*, Longman, London 1985.

feature.[264] The indigenous peoples of the United States—commonly referred to as Indians—are a diverse group in terms of language, lifestyle and habitat.[265] The first Europeans are believed to have reached the shores of North America around the year 1000. However, it was not until Christopher Columbus's expedition in 1492 that European expansion and colonization of these territories began, lasting nearly three centuries. The first permanent settlement of Europeans in the future United States—in St. Augustine, Florida—was founded by Spanish sailor Pedro Menéndez de Avilés in 1565.[266] The roots of the English-speaking culture of the United States go back to 1620 when English Protestants (religious colonists) arrived on the ship *Mayflower* and settled in the area of today's Plymouth, Massachusetts.

The 17th century, with the steady immigration of Europeans and their intensive mastery of the American continent, marked the beginning of slavery in the future United States, which lasted for the next two centuries. Africans in particular were used as slave labor, brought by force from West Africa. Although the ban on slavery had been introduced, state by state, from 1787, it was not until the 13th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution was passed in 1865 that slavery was abolished in the whole country. Among the last to ratify the amendment were Delaware, Missouri, Maryland, New Jersey and Kentucky.[267]

The resolution to abolish slavery that was signed by then-President Abraham Lincoln marked a watershed moment in U.S. history. However, it did not bring equality to all residents of the United States; people with dark skin color were not entitled to the same

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[264] As a sovereign state independent from Great Britain, it has existed since July 4, 1776.

[265] In 2020, the American Indian and Alaska Native people represented 2.9 percent of the U.S. population. See ICT, *2020 Census. Native Population Increased by 86.5 Percent*, August 13, 2021. Retrieved June 30, 2023, from https://ictnews.org/news/2020-census-native-population-increased-by-86-5-percent.

[266] Florida Center for Instructional Technology, *Florida's Historic Places. St. Augustine*. Retrieved June 30, 2023, from https://fcit.usf.edu/florida/lessons/augustine/augustine.htm.

[267] Kentucky, the state where bell hooks was born, ratified the Amendment as the penultimate state, only in 1976.

civil rights as white citizens.[268] Existing racial segregation made it difficult for Black people to function on a daily basis for the next century.[269]

Racial segregation—discrimination based on skin color—was legally regulated in the Confederate states (more precisely, the Confederate States of America, the southern states of the U.S.) after the end of the Civil War in 1865. Officially, it lasted until the 1960s and involved forcing the Black population to use separate schools and specially designated places on public transportation and food outlets. There was also a ban on interracial marriages. Only growing social discontent and deepening poverty among the Black population prompted top-down attempts to officially abolish segregation. The work of human rights activists such as Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King Jr., among others, led to the passing of two important laws in 1964: *Voting Rights Act* and *Civil Rights Act*.[270] From that moment, a new law, which provided for racial desegregation, took effect.[271] However, the abolition of racial discrimination by legislative acts did not mean the abolition of prejudice in the everyday social life of Americans, as proven by the current Black Lives Matter movement, which aims to fight for real equal rights for Black people and combat systemic racism.[272]

4.2. bell hooks, or Gloria Jean Watkins

bell hooks a.k.a. Gloria Jean Watkins was born in 1952 in Hopkinsville, Christian County, Kentucky, United States of America. She came

[268] See, among others, D. K. Fremon, *The Jim Crow Laws and Racism in American History*, Enslow Publishers, Berkeley Heights, NJ 2000.

[269] See, among others, I. Berlin, M. Favreau, S. Miller, *Remembering Slavery. African Americans Talk About Their Personal Experiences of Slavery and Emancipation*, New Press, New York 2021.

[270] See the text of the *Civil Rights Act*. Retrieved June 30, 2023, from https://www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/civil-rights-act.

[271] See, among others, G. Orfield, S. E. Eaton, *Dismantling Desegregation. The Quiet Reversal of Brown v. Board of Education*, New Press, New York 1996.

[272] Official website of the movement: https://blacklivesmatter.com/.

from a working-class family. Her father, Veodis Watkins, worked as a janitor, and her mother, Rosa Bell Watkins, took care of the house and the children. GJW was the second youngest of seven siblings: she had five older sisters and a younger brother.

Her early childhood and first stage of schooling in the 1950s and 1960s coincided with the times of racial segregation and later desegregation. bell hooks recalled this period of her life as difficult, chiefly because of the racism she experienced. The daily lives of the population of African-American origin were marked by difficult living conditions and social exclusion, which was manifested in the territorial division of the city and its neighborhoods. The separation of the mostly poor dark-skinned residents of Hopkinsville from the rich white residents led to the formation of closed communities. GJW grew up in such a hermetic community; one which focused on in-group integration and separation from the whites.

As a child, she attended an elementary school where Black teachers taught Black children. When racial segregation was officially abolished, GJW was sent to an integrated school. There, as a Black girl, she experienced a feeling of dehumanization. Very early on, she discovered that her passion were books. From the age of ten, she dreamed of becoming a poet. However, this dream did not meet with the approval of her parents, who did not share her intellectual ambitions (they wanted their daughter to marry or take a teaching job).

Poetry helped GJW during her childhood and adolescence to cope with difficult experiences, in particular, violence and feelings of loneliness. In books, she discovered a different, better world from the one she knew. However, following her dreams meant distancing herself from her family. She wanted to decide her own future, thus opposing her parents' plans and will. As bell hooks confessed later, "I was mapping a different destiny."[273]

To pursue her vision of life, GJW went to college in California. She still wanted to become a poet and chose English philology at Stanford University in Palo Alto. Her parents' lack of support for her decision stemmed from their fear that studying in California, more than

[273] bell hooks, *Wounds of Passion…*, p. x.

two thousand miles away from her hometown, would change their daughter and distance her from her family and her roots.

Leaving home proved to be a difficult experience not only because of the separation from the family. Her "new world" in California turned out to be quite familiar: as a student, GJW frequently experienced feelings of loneliness, as well as racial, gender and class discrimination. Although she received a scholarship, it was not enough to cover all the costs associated with studying. Unable to rely on her parents for support, she took up gainful employment, including working as a nursery caregiver.

During her college years, she met poet Nathaniel Mackey, a student seven years her senior, who was also of African-American descent. It was he, as her partner, who persuaded her to write a book about Black women's experiences and feminism. Thus, the idea for the book *Ain't I a Woman. Black Women and Feminism* was born.[274]

After completing her undergraduate studies in 1973, GJW moved with Nathaniel to Oakland, California. During this time, she devoted herself to writing her first book (*Ain't I a Woman…*) while simultaneously working for a telecommunications company where she met other Black women experiencing the oppression that she was writing about. A year later, due to her partner's career, the pair moved to Madison, Wisconsin. There, she undertook graduate studies at the University of Wisconsin, graduating in 1976 with a master's degree in English literature.

After completing her master's degree, GJW returned to California with her partner. She took a job as a senior lecturer at the University of Southern California, where she taught women's studies from 1976 to 1979. In 1978, she made her debut as a poet with a volume of poems entitled *And There We Wept*. The book was published under the pseudonym bell hooks.

During the 1980/1981 academic year, GJW worked at the University of California in San Francisco. In 1981, after many years of effort, her

[274] It took her seven years to write the book and three more to find a publisher. More on this topic: bell hooks, *Talking Back…*, p. 146.

first non-fiction book, *Ain't I a Woman. Black Women and Feminism*, was published. She went on to earn her doctorate from the University of California in Santa Cruz in 1983. It was a monograph on the work of Toni Morrison, an African-American novelist and winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature. It was also at that time that her longtime relationship with Nathaniel Mackey ended.

In the 1980s, GJW developed her career as a scholar and writer. She published *Feminist Theory. From Margin to Center* (1984) and worked as an adjunct professor at Yale University in New Haven, Connecticut, from 1985 until 1988. There she taught in the Afro-American Studies and English Department. She described her experience at Yale in an essay, *On Being Black at Yale. Education as the Practice of Freedom*, which she included in the collection *Talking Back. Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black* (1989). The piece was critical of one of America's oldest and most prestigious Ivy League universities.

From 1988 to 1994, she worked as an adjunct professor in the Department of Women's Studies and American Literature at Oberlin College in Ohio. During this period, she published several books: the aforementioned *Talking Back…*, *Yearning. Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (1990), *Sisters of the Yam. Black Women and Self-Recovery* (1993) and *Teaching to Transgress. Education as the Practice of Freedom* (1994). For the book *Yearning…*, she received The American Book Awards/Before Columbus Foundation Award in 1991. Three years later, she was honored for her lifetime achievement with The Writer's Award from the Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund.

In 1995, she took a position as a professor of English literature at the City College of New York, where she worked until 2004. Also in 1995, she began working with Holt Publishing, publishing the book *Killing Rage. Ending Racism*. In the following years, Holt published her two autobiographies: *Bone Black. Memories of Girlhood* (1996) and *Wounds of Passion. A Writing Life* (1997), as well as collections of essays, including *Feminism is for Everybody. Passionate Politics* (2000), *Where We Stand. Class Matters* (2000), *All About Love. New Visions* (2001), *Communion. The Female Search for Love* (2003) and *Teaching Community. A Pedagogy of Hope* (2003).

In 2004, GJW began working at the Berea College in Berea, Kentucky, as Distinguished Professor in Residence.[275] It was also there that the bell hooks Institute was founded in 2014 with the motto, "Teach. Remember. Explore. Celebrate." On December 15, 2021, due to kidney failure, bell hooks died at her home in Berea at the age of 69.

4.2.1. The pseudonym

GJW took the pseudonym "bell hooks" from her maternal great-grandmother's name. Adopting a pseudonym was a conscious decision on her part; a gesture of respect for and remembrance of her own ancestry, especially her female ancestors, the women who influenced her life story. bell hooks described her great-grandmother as a proud woman who was known for boldly speaking her mind, as well as for her rather biting, not to say, abrasive, language. As a girl, GJW was compared to Bell Hooks because of her unruly character. To distinguish herself from her great-grandmother, she spelled her alias with lowercase letters: bell hooks.

> One of the many reasons I chose to write using the pseudonym bell hooks, a family name …, was to construct a writer-identity that would challenge and subdue all impulses leading me away from speech into silence. … I must be kin to bell hooks—a sharp-tongued woman, a woman who spoke her mind, a woman who was not afraid to talk back. I claimed this legacy of defiance, of will, of courage, affirming my link to female ancestors who were bold and daring in their speech. … bell hooks as I discovered, claimed, and invented her was my ally, my support.[276]

GJW consistently used a writing pseudonym since the publication of her first book. She also used the pseudonym during public debates and lectures where she was introduced as bell hooks and even Dr. bell hooks.

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[275] Berea College is one of the few colleges that does not charge tuition, thus enabling free education. Every student receives an academic scholarship. In exchange for the scholarship, students are required to work for the university and individual departments. More about the university: https://www.berea.edu/.

[276] bell hooks, *Talking Back…*, p. 9.

In this book, when discussing bell hooks's texts, I try to be precise in marking the division between the autobiography's author and its heroine, between the writer and the real person, although this division is conventional. Indeed, it is impossible to draw a clear line separating the identity of bell hooks from that of GJW. However, I assume that I am discussing the biography/life of Gloria Jean Watkins and analyzing the texts written by bell hooks.

The author of the autobiography, whose name appears on the title page of the books, is bell hooks. bell hooks is also the narrator who tells the story of her life or, more precisely, the life of GJW. GJW, in turn, is the heroine of the story, the biographical subject. Although the woman bearing the name Gloria Jean Watkins and bell hooks are one and the same person, there are clearly two identities in her texts and autobiographies: the woman living in the real world (Watkins) and the author of the writings (bell hooks). In an interview, bell hooks explained:

> First of all, I live in a city of 12,000 people where most of them don't have a clue about who bell hooks is for the most part, or where someone asks "Is bell hooks a person?" There is humility in the life that I lead, because one thing about having my given name, Gloria Jean, which is such a great Appalachian hillbilly name, is that I'm not walking around in my daily life usually as bell hooks. I'm walking around in the dailiness of my life as just the ordinary Gloria Jean. That's changing a bit in the little town that I live in because more of me as a thinker, writer and artist is coming out into the world of the town that I live in.[277]

4.2.2. "Talking back": views and writing output

This subsection offers only a brief summary of bell hooks's views. Since the subject of my research are this author's autobiographical texts, I do not enter into a discussion of her ideas.

Since the publication of her first non-fiction book in 1981, bell hooks has been recognized as one of the most prominent yet radical contemporary feminist voices. Described as a Renaissance woman, this

[277] bell hooks, Buddhism, the Beats and Loving Blackness, *The New York Times*, 2015. Retrieved June 30, 2023, from https://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2015/12/10/bell-hooks-buddhism-the-beats-and-loving-blackness/?mcubz=3.

writer, social activist and educator has presented her views in numerous book publications that transcend one subject area or a single writing genre, including poetry, memoirs, literary criticism, film reviews and children's books. Her leading theme was the intersection between gender, race and class, although she also wrote about pop culture, art, love and spirituality. I will discuss her writing output selectively and non-chronologically, focusing mainly on her "feminist-pedagogical" manifesto, which I believe is expressed in the term "talking back," reflecting bell hooks's political thinking and her social sensitivity.

At the core of her feminist theory[278] are the concepts of critical consciousness and liberation from oppression, taken from Paulo Freire's idea of the "pedagogy of the oppressed."[279] Freire formulated his concepts on the example of educational activities carried out among the poorest inhabitants of north-eastern Brazil in the 1950s. His program aimed to teach people to write and read along with learning critical consciousness. As he argued, awareness of one's position in the social system is the beginning of the emancipation process. But this cannot be done in silence, for silence is a sign of oppression in the forms of exploitation and dehumanization. That is why it is so important to talk openly about one's own experiences. bell hooks repeats after Freire that silence is a marker of exploitation, oppression and dehumanization, whereas speaking is a sign of liberation and a metaphor for agency.[280] In her opinion,

> … the idea of finding one's voice or having a voice assumes a primacy in talk, discourse, writing, and action. As metaphor for self-transformation, it has been especially relevant for groups of women who have previously never had a public voice, women who are speaking and writing for the first time, including many women of color. … Speaking becomes both a way to engage in active self-transformation and a rite of passage where one moves from being object to being subject.[281]

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[278] Presented in, e.g., *Teaching to Transgress. Education as the Practice of Freedom* (1994) and *Teaching Community. A Pedagogy of Hope* (2003).

[279] P. Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, transl. by M. Bergman Ramos, Herder and Herder, New York 1970.

[280] bell hooks, *Talking Back…*, p. 129.

[281] Ibid., p. 12.

Thus, speaking as a breaking of silence is both an active transformation and a rite of passage in which the status of the speaker changes. It is a metaphor for resisting oppression, as well as a chance to move from the position of the oppressed to that of the subject. As bell hooks points out: "Only as subjects can we speak."[282]

bell hooks uses the phrase "talking back" to describe disobeying the order to remain silent as a gesture of political emancipation. This means giving oneself the right to speak up on one's own behalf in situations where one is deprived of this right due to low social standing.

In a patriarchal society, and bell hooks considers the United States to be such, a subordinate social position is assigned to children, and also women. The author points out that the social position of girls is particularly culturally "handicapped" in this regard. "… the punishments for these acts of speech seemed endless. They were intended to silence me—the child—and more particularly the girl child."[283] The punishment was not only physical, but also psychological. Girls who talk too much, as well as women who dare to speak their minds openly, are sometimes stigmatized as mentally ill and crazy. As a child, GJW was constantly told that she would end up in a psychiatric hospital because she talked too much, asked too many questions and wanted to know too much. The mechanism of suppressing girls' verbal expression served a specific purpose. As bell hooks writes, the idea was to suppress their natural need to speak out and thus socialize female children into silence. The effects of this socialization are women's timidity and insecurity in expressing their thoughts or showing firmness.

In the public sphere, it is men who have the right to speak freely, express their own views, speak to others, discuss or argue. In the private sphere, as bell hooks points out, silence is considered primarily an attribute of white women. The voices of adult women have always been heard in Black communities. However, it was a kind of monologue or "chatter" in the background, which, like the sounds

[282] Ibid.
[283] Ibid., p. 6.

of music from a radio, echoed around without disturbing other voices and conversations, especially those of men.

> … the voices of black women—giving orders, making threats, fussing—could be tuned out, could become a kind of background music, audible but not acknowledged as significant speech. Dialogue—the sharing of speech and recognition—took place not between mother and child or mother and male authority figure but among black women.[284]

The author, observing women who spoke freely only among themselves, saw her chance to free her voice in writing: "Writing was a way to capture speech, to hold onto it, keep it close."[285]

bell hooks applies the tenets of the pedagogy of the oppressed to her group of origin, namely African Americans and especially African-American women. Unlike Freire, she draws attention to a special category of the oppressed: Black, working-class women.

> In Freire's case, he speaks as a white man of privilege who stands and acts in solidarity with oppressed and exploited groups, especially in their efforts to establish literacy programs that emphasize education for critical consciousness. In my case, as a black woman from a working-class background, I stand and act as a member of an oppressed, exploited group, who has managed to acquire a degree of privilege.[286]

According to bell hooks, the sense of inequality and social injustice has long remained unspoken and/or silenced among Blacks, especially among women.[287] And yet their experiences are shaped not only by sexism and classism, as is the case with white women, but also by racism. Black women share the strife of economic oppression and racial discrimination with Black men and gender inequality with white women. These women thus experience a tangle of complex

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[284] Ibid.

[285] Ibid.

[286] Ibid., p. 101.

[287] Freire, describing in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* the process of emancipation of the oppressed through critical consciousness, did not include women in it. Writing about reclaiming voice and agency as an effect of breaking the silence, he did not mention women as a group "locked in a culture of silence." bell hooks was the one who tried to advance the politics of women's voice.

oppression—exploitation and economic injustice, as well as racist and patriarchal violence, on the part of the political and economic systems, and at the same time, sexism on the part of men.[288] How can they resist this oppression? First of all, through education.

bell hooks understands education as a political issue for exploited and oppressed people.[289] It is a space for developing critical consciousness, a process that takes place not within school walls, but between people, in conversation. It is a space for dialogue and mutual development, that is, a way out of the culture of silence. Like Freire, bell hooks argues that education is meant to serve both individual and social transformation. Its goal is to change reality and to practice freedom from oppression.[290]

The history of slavery in the United States shows that the Black community viewed education—learning, reading books, writing—as a political necessity. Without literacy, even a freed slave could remain forever dependent on the will of their persecutor. However, despite this pragmatic necessity, bell hooks argues, from the time of slavery until today, education has been arousing the suspicion of African Americans,[291] for education is an ally

[288] In this way, bell hooks introduced an intersectional perspective to her reflection on the situation of Black women.

[289] bell hooks, *Talking Back…*, p. 98.

[290] Education as a practice of freedom, as opposed to education as a practice of control, denies that we are abstract, isolated, independent and without attachment to the world. It also denies that the world exists as a reality apart from us. See P. Freire, *Pedagogy…*, p. 52.

[291] According to the Bureau of Census, African Americans accounted for 7 percent of all undergraduate students in 1970. See M. K. Herndon, J. B. Hirt, Black Students and Their Families. What Leads to Success in College, *Journal of Black Studies*, 2004, 34(4), pp. 489–513. In 2015, according to an analysis published in *The New York Times*, Black students accounted for 15 percent of all undergraduate students at Public Flagship Universities and The Ivy League universities (a group of eight elite universities: Brown, Columbia, Cornell, Dartmouth, Harvard, Penn, Princeton and Yale). "Black and Hispanic students are more underrepresented at the nation's top universities than they were 35 years ago": J. Ashkenas, P. Haeyoun, A. Pearce, Even With Affirmative Action, Blacks and Hispanics Are More Underrepresented at Top Colleges Than 35 Years Ago, *The New York Times*, August 24, 2017. Retrieved June 30, 2023, from https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2017/08/24/us/affirmative-action.html.

of assimilation.[292] On the one hand, it is a tool of resistance, but at the same time, it leads to divisions within the group, between the uneducated and the educated. The latter assimilate much more easily the values and attitudes of whites, the dominant group in society.

Power and ideology play a significant role in the construction of knowledge, education and culture. Opposing education that consists of forced and unreflective acceptance and implementation of the political goals of power, bell hooks advocates the idea of critical consciousness, of learning to speak and write about one's own experience and history. Thus, she is in favor of crossing traditional pedagogical boundaries, in particular, changing the authoritarian model of the teacher as omniscient and students as the objects of knowledge.

According to bell hooks, institutional education ignores the category of experience, and thus does not teach pupils to draw from what is closest and most familiar—one's own experience—when thinking, speaking and writing. Invoking personal experience has often been seen as a sign of intellectual weakness or even anti-intellectualism. bell hooks, on the other hand, considers referring to our own stories to be an explicit way of integrating people, of building a community capable of overcoming inequalities of race, class and gender.

Regardless of the topic under discussion, personal experience is always at the heart of bell hooks's writing. She has authored 37 books. With the first one, *Ain't I a Woman. Black Women and Feminism* (1981), she made a name for herself as a critical and radical voice of African-American women. The book deals with the identity of Black women and their social position in American society. It is a history of slavery and liberation, yet it is also a testimony to the process of maturation of the feminist consciousness of bell hooks herself. The analysis begins with the specific experiences of sexism and racism in the lives of Black women. The author posits that not only gender, but also race and class background are factors of oppression in a contemporary patriarchal society, which for her is the United States. She therefore calls for the emergence of a new feminist theory that would encompass the diverse aspects

[292] bell hooks, *Talking Back…*, p. 98.

of dominance and reflect the needs and experiences of non-white working-class women.

bell hooks is critical of the concept of feminism that sets equality between men and women as its goal. In her view, this framing includes only white, heterosexual, educated, middle-class Americans and excludes women of non-white skin color or women from underprivileged social and ethnic groups who take up gainful employment not because of career ambitions or self-fulfillment, but out of necessity—because they are often the sole breadwinners of their families. Hence the question, repeated after Sojourner Truth: "Ain't I a woman?"[293]

According to bell hooks, there are various forms of oppression of women and implicit connections and dependencies between them. Black women have been and continue to be discriminated against and depreciated not only because of their sex/gender, but also because of their skin color and socio-economic background. bell hooks points out that Black women have not been able to unite to fight for women's rights because they have not treated femininity as an important aspect of their identity. Socialized to depreciate their own femininity, they saw racism first and foremost as something that determined their lives and how they saw themselves. "We were afraid to acknowledge that sexism could be just as oppressive as racism."[294] According to bell hooks, the silence of Black women is not an expression of their consent to the oppression, but rather a symptom of resignation and acceptance of fate.

Intersectionality is a recurring motif in bell hooks's subsequent books. An important reference point in them is the criticism of so-called white feminism (second-wave feminism), which, according

[293] Sojourner Truth (1797–1883) was a Black abolitionist activist, born a slave under the name Isabella Baumfree. She is known for her speech at the women's rights convention in Akron, Ohio, in 1852. Since none of the white participants at the meeting, mostly men, wanted to give her the floor, she took it herself. She argued against the notion that women are inherently weak, showing off her welted, muscular arms and asking, "Ain't I a woman?" Sojourner Truth's full speech: *Ain't I a Woman*. Retrieved June 30, 2023, from https://www.nps.gov/articles/sojourner-truth.htm.

[294] bell hooks, *Ain't I a Woman. Black Women and Feminism*, South End Press, Boston 1981, p. 1.

to the author, disregards issues of race and thus discriminates against women who are not white. To describe the power structure underlying the patriarchal social order, bell hooks uses the category "imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy." In her opinion, one cannot understand the nature of domination unless one understands the complexity of this system. The forces of imperialism, white supremacy, capitalism and patriarchy are all interconnected, so they must be considered not in isolation, but in mutual interplay.

In addition to feminist themes, bell hooks often addresses social issues in her works, with a particular focus on issues affecting the African-American community in the United States. These include racial discrimination and socio-economic inequality, exclusion and self-exclusion, and cultural heritage.

A separate group of bell hooks's books are personal memoirs (autobiographical texts) and critical works on popular culture—music, film and literature—art and spirituality, as well as children's books.

4.2.3. Subject bibliography

Here is the complete list of publication by bell hooks:

And There We Wept (Golemics, Los Angeles 1978, poetry)
Ain't I a Woman. Black Women and Feminism (South End Press, Boston 1981)
Feminist Theory. From Margin to Center (South End Press, Boston 1984)
Talking Back. Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black (South End Press, Boston 1989)
Yearning. Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics (South End Press, Boston 1990)
Breaking Bread. Insurgent Black Intellectual Life, co-authored with Cornel West (South End Press, Boston 1991)
Black Looks. Race and Representation (South End Press, Boston 1992)
Daughters of the Dust. The Making of an African American Woman's Film, co-edited with Julie Dash and Toni Cade Bambara (New Press, New York 1992)
A Woman's Mourning Song (Harlem River Press, New York–London 1993, poetry)

Sisters of the Yam. Black Women and Self-Recovery (South End Press, Boston 1993)
Outlaw Culture. Resisting Representations (Routledge, New York 1994)
Teaching to Transgress. Education as the Practice of Freedom (South End Press, Boston 1994)
Killing Rage. Ending Racism (Holt, New York 1995)
Art on My Mind. Visual Politics (New Press, New York 1995)
Bone Black. Memories of Girlhood (Holt, New York 1996)
Reel to Real. Race, Sex, and Class at the Movies (Routledge, New York 1996)
Wounds of Passion. A Writing Life (Holt, New York 1997)
Happy to be Nappy (Hyperion Books for Children, New York 1999, children's book)
Remembered Rapture. The Writer at Work (Holt, New York 1999)
Feminism is for Everybody. Passionate Politics (Pluto Press, London 2000)
Where We Stand. Class Matters (Routledge, New York 2000)
All About Love. New Visions (William Morrow, New York 2001; part 1 of the *Love Trilogy*)
Salvation. Black People and Love (William Morrow, New York 2001; part 2 of the *Love Trilogy*)
Homemade Love (Jump At The Sun/Hyperion Books for Children, New York 2002, children's book)
Be Boy Buzz (Hyperion Books for Children, New York 2002, children's book)
Communion. The Female Search for Love (William Morrow, New York 2003; part 3 of the *Love Trilogy*)
Teaching Community. A Pedagogy of Hope (Routledge, New York 2003)
Rock My Soul. Black People and Self-Esteem (Atria Books, New York 2003)
The Will to Change. Men, Masculinity, and Love (Atria Books, New York 2004)
We Real Cool. Black Men and Masculinity (Routledge, New York 2004)
Soul Sister. Women, Friendship, and Fulfillment (South End Press, Boston 2005)
Homegrown. Engaged Cultural Criticism, co-authored with Amalia Mesa-Bains (South End Press, Boston 2006)
Belonging. A Culture of Place (Routledge, New York 2009)

Teaching Critical Thinking. Practical Wisdom (Routledge, New York 2010)
Appalachian Elegy. Poetry and Place. Kentucky Voices Series (University Press of Kentucky, Lexington 2012)
Writing Beyond Race. Living Theory and Practice (Routledge, New York 2013)
Uncut Funk. A Contemplative Dialogue, co-authored with Stuart Hall, foreword by Paul Gilroy (Routledge, New York 2018)

4.3. Biomythography in autobiography: an introduction to analysis

bell hooks's way of thinking about autobiography was shaped by her reading of a book entitled *Zami. A New Spelling of My Name. A Biomythography* (1982) by Audre Lorde.[295] Lorde's autobiographical story is categorized as a new type of autobiographical writing. Although, ostensibly, *Zami* does not deviate from the classic autobiographical structure—the author maintains the retrospective nature of the narrative and writes in the first person—Lorde's goal is not a precise account or a description of the events of her life, but rather a free interpretation and even construction of the past. It is biomythography or, as the author herself explains, a combination of elements of history, biography and myth. *Zami* is a literary attempt to go beyond what is historically, socially and culturally assigned to a woman. In her autobiography, Lorde blends historical facts with fantasies, song lyrics or lines of poetry she created as a teenager. Interweaving threads from different periods of her life, Lorde reveals the process of inner development she experienced as a Black woman, poet and feminist while growing up during racial segregation in the United States. A similar mood of writing characterizes bell hooks's essays. The author reconstructs autobiographical experiences not so much for the purpose of writing a memoir, but to undertake a collective reflection based on specific experiences that goes beyond

[295] A. Lorde, *Zami. A New Spelling of My Name*, Crossing Press, Berkeley 1982. See also A. Ostaszewska, Alternative Autobiographical Practices on the Example of "Zami. A New Spelling of My Name" by Audre Lorde, *Polish Biographical Studies*, 2021, 9, pp. 5–22.

the individual self. Referring to her own experiences, she tries to show how the personal is political.

4.3.1. *Talking Back. Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black*

The book *Talking Back. Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black* was published by South End Press, the publishing house with which bell hooks began working in 1981 on her first book, *Ain't I a Woman. Black Women and Feminism*. As she states in the introduction, writing *Talking Back…* took her a long time. Writing about yourself, i.e., autobiographical writing, involves a fear not so much of revealing yourself—of making the private public—but rather of being punished for revealing something from *another's* life that they would never want to have revealed. bell hooks admits: "… so many black folks have been raised to believe that there is just so much that you should not talk about, not in private and not in public."[296] However, for herself, talking about private matters was and is a political issue. This is because it serves to heal the wounds caused by racism, social exclusion, sexism and social inequality. Recounting one's experiences performs important functions. It allows one to incorporate reflection into everyday life; to look mindfully at one's social position, background and history.

In the story about herself, bell hooks refers to the history of more than two centuries of slavery, discrimination, persecution and oppression of African-American men and women in the United States of America. In her opinion, the Black experience should become an open topic of discussion, especially among African Americans themselves, who are not so much ignorant of their history as they consciously reject it. In *Talking Back…*, she repeatedly addresses the cultural heritage of African Americans and the need to remember it. She cites a phrase from the Freedom Charter for good reason: "Our struggle is also a struggle of memory against forgetting."[297]

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[296] bell hooks, *Talking Back…*, p. 2.

[297] Ibid., p. 4. The Freedom Charter is a declaration of fundamental principles adopted by the South African Congress Alliance in 1955. See African National Congress, *The Freedom Charter*. Retrieved June 30, 2023, from https://web.archive.org/web/20110629074215/http://www.anc.org.za/show.php?id=72.

The book *Talking Back…* consists of 25 essays on diverse topics, united by an autobiographical theme. The texts are not a testimony of chronologically-arranged events, but at the same time, they cannot be described as solely intimate confessions. bell hooks begins each essay by recalling a specific childhood memory or, more generally, an event from her biography. However, she is not consistent in terms of chronology. Memories from her childhood are interspersed with recollections of her college days and her work as a lecturer at Yale University (1985–1988). They become food for thought for her on more universal topics: racism, discrimination and social exclusion, education, upbringing or emancipation and feminism.

In the first essay, bell hooks refers to the title phrase "talking back" and explains its meaning:

> In the world of the southern black community I grew up in, "back talk" and "talking back" meant speaking as an equal to an authority figure.[298]

Individuals with authority in the Black community were primarily men, and for children, their parents. Children, on the other hand, had no right to speak at all. Speaking up when one is deprived of such a right, besides being an act of courage, is also an act, as bell hooks writes, that is truly risky because it may evoke punishment.

For the author of *Talking Back…*, the experience of being disenfranchised proved so significant that she addressed it in her first essay and even used it as the guiding idea of her book. The courage to speak out and speak with one's own voice in order to express one's own opinion—even at the risk of getting punished—is a recurring motif in bell hooks's texts and proves to be her *idée fixe*.

In *Talking Back…*, the author describes how she remembers American society in the 1960s, 1970s, and even the early 1980s. It is a tumultuous story, given the many changes that have taken place in the laws and customs of American men and women during that time. I assume that among these changes, the two which have played a significant role in the case of bell hooks are the abolition of racial segregation and the emergence of feminism. The former enabled her

[298] bell hooks, *Talking Back…*, p. 5.

to study at the university of her choice rather than at a university exclusively for African Americans, while the latter gave her the opportunities for self-empowerment, starting with studying at the university, working in academia and becoming a writer.

4.3.2. *Bone Black. Memories of Girlhood*

Bone Black. Memories of Girlhood, unlike *Talking Back…*, is devoted exclusively to memories of childhood, or more precisely, girlhood. With this book, bell hooks draws attention to the importance of girlhood in a woman's life. Additionally, she expresses that in her opinion, there is a general lack of similar publications, namely, autobiographical memoirs about the period of girlhood and becoming a woman.

bell hooks treats this book as a peculiar autobiography, a dialectic of fact and fiction. It is a collection of sketches about what was, but also about what only seems to have been, and therefore, about what is imaginary or dreamed. Most importantly, *Bone Black…*, apart from specific events and experiences, is concerned with enduring impressions and emotions that influence how that past is remembered today. According to bell hooks, the precision in describing her state of mind and the atmosphere of the events she recalls is more significant than the accuracy in reporting the facts of the biography. Memory, she says, does not serve to passively recreate the past or the nostalgia for it. Memory serves to transform the present,[299] while writing fulfills an emancipatory function by giving one the chance to abandon the position of pariah and attempt to "rewrite oneself."

Aside from the introduction, there are no comments or digressions in the book, written *post facto*, from the perspective of an adult woman recounting her childhood. Nothing interrupts the narrative, which is sometimes conducted in the third person, as if the author wanted to distance herself from her own biography.

This time bell hooks focuses exclusively on the past. She admits that in *Bone Black…*, fragments of her childhood memories are

[299] bell hooks, *Yearning. Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics*, South End Press, Boston 1991, p. 40.

connected randomly and irrationally. However, there is some deliberate intent in this:

> Without telling everything that happened, they document all that remains most vivid. They are the foundation on which I have built a life in writing, a life committed to intellectual pursuits.[300]

For bell hooks, *Bone Black…* is a story of a girl rebellion. As she explains in the introduction, it is a story about the hardship of creating herself. GJW lives with the belief that she has been cast out of the world around her (especially her family), and at the same time seeks ways to belong to that world. Therefore, it appears that *Bone Black…* is primarily a story about the experience of childhood loneliness and attempts to overcome it. The theme of loneliness is prevalent. "I am a child who is sad all the time."[301] Besides, it is to loneliness that bell hooks attributes the greatest identity-forming potential. "This is my home. This dark, bone black inner cave where I am making a world for myself."[302] Loneliness is what made her start writing. It is also the subject of her confession that concludes her first autobiography: "Loneliness brings me to the edge of what I know. My soul is dark like the inner world of the cave—*bone black*."[303]

4.3.3. *Wounds of Passion. A Writing Life*

Wounds of Passion. A Writing Life is bell hooks's second book that is autobiographical in form and content, published in 1997, a year after *Bone Black…* They share an unconventional structure, which manifests itself mainly in two elements: first, the lack of chronological order of events, and second, the interchangeable use of first and third person to describe the author's experiences. The departure from a linear timeline may be unintentional, for as bell hooks writes, she sees her past in a fragmented way: "I do not remember the big picture

[300] bell hooks, *Bone Black. Memories of Girlhood*, Holt, New York 1996, p. xiv.
[301] Ibid., p. 76.
[302] Ibid., p. 183.
[303] Ibid., p. 181.

of childhood, everything comes to me in small broken fragments."[304] As in previous books, the chapters are organized thematically.

The book is a continuation of the memoirs contained in *Bone Black…* What was described in *Bone Black…* as a phantasm and a dream has the chance to become reality in *Wounds of Passion…* A Black girl from the South who dreamt of being a poet is now entering adulthood. bell hooks focuses on conveying a fundamental experience for her, namely, the process of becoming a writer. Accordingly, *Wounds of Passion…* consist of memories that show that process: from the birth of a passion for reading in childhood, through dreams and first attempts to create poetry, to writing her first book. The main axis of this autobiographical story is located in GJW's time as a student, from the start of her undergraduate studies to her doctoral defense.

bell hooks constructs her story in a deliberate and purposeful way; she wants to show how she went from being a girl aspiring to be a poet to becoming a (Black) feminist, the author of *Ain't I a Woman…* She attributes an important role in this process to her relationship with a man named Mack. Mack is a poet. It was he who persuaded GJW to write the book she wanted to read as a student.

> Years ago when folks would ask how it was I came to write my first book, *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* at nineteen, I would always share that it was after listening to me complain endlessly about the absence of material about black women in my courses that my partner urged me to write my own book—to tell my story.[305]

bell hooks devotes a lot of space to Mack and their relationship in *Wounds of Passion…* The book begins with the story of their life together and ends with a chapter on their breakup. Her relationship with Mack is an important theme in bell hooks's autobiography. The author describes a number of experiences that are, directly or indirectly, the aftermath of this relationship. However, the story of a relationship that lasted twelve years serves as the backdrop for another story—the story of the process of maturing as a writer, of becoming bell hooks.

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[304] bell hooks, *Wounds of Passion…*, p. 17.

[305] Ibid., pp. xiv–xv.

5. bell hooks as a narrator, biographical subject and observer

Jerome Bruner writes that through storytelling, life ceases to be as it had been experienced before and becomes as it is told.[306] Following these words, I want to look at the ways in which bell hooks tells her own biography.

In bell hooks's autobiographical texts, one can distinguish three roles that the author plays: narrator, biographical subject and observer/commentator of her own life. The narrator is the author herself—she is the one who tells the story of her life, or rather, the life of Gloria Jean Watkins. GJW is the biographical subject and therefore a kind of a prototype of the author anchored in experience. Both roles—narrator and subject—are direct: bell hooks, as the narrator, recounts the events in which she herself participated as GJW. She most often speaks in the first person, so she is also the protagonist of her autobiography. The point of view she represents comes directly from the depicted world. The narrator is inside it.

Although bell hooks is a disclosed narrator—she speaks in her own name and tells about her life—there are times when she takes on the role of a witness narrator and employs a third-person narrative. She does this when she wants to gain distance and look at her life from the outside of the depicted world. However, this perspective, being on the outside of the autobiography, is primarily appropriate for the third role, that of observer/commentator. It involves

[306] J. Bruner, The Narrative Construction of Reality, *Critical Inquiry*, 1991, 18(1), pp. 1–21.

depersonalization, and with it, readiness to conduct analysis and research. This is the role bell hooks assumes to analyze and reflect on her biographical experiences from the point of view of a researcher-writer and author of books on feminist and socio-cultural issues. In this approach, bell hooks becomes her own object of reflection.

The gaze of the observer is more objectifying than that of the narrator and subject, for it allows one to go beyond one's own experience, opening it up to a broader context of interpretation. Understanding is achieved in this case by looking at a given situation from different points of view. Thus, to summarize, it can be assumed that if the narrator is the "I" *telling* the story of her life, then the biographical subject experiences the "I" *being told*, and the observer/commentator *analyzes the story* being told.

5.1. The narrator: to speak with her own voice

A narrative is a mode of expression designed to present events in a specific temporal order. The "narrator" is the person who conducts the narrative and is therefore responsible for the depicted reality and the methods of storytelling used. The main questions I pose regarding bell hooks as the narrator of her biography are: How does she present her autobiography? What (autobiographical) approach does she adopt toward the narrative situation? In what temporal order does she conduct her narrative? What constitutes the content of her writing, that is, what experiences does she share in her texts?

5.1.1. The autobiographical stance

In her writing, bell hooks takes up two of the three autobiographical stances proposed by Małgorzata Czermińska (testimony, confession and challenge).[307] In addition to confession, one can distinguish in her works the characteristics inherent in the third approach—challenge. bell hooks wrote her autobiographies with readers in mind. These

[307] M. Czermińska, *The Autobiographical Triangle…*

are not private notes made available to the public, but texts written with the intention of publishing them as books.

Particularly in the case of the collection of essays *Talking Back…*, the distinction that Adam Fitas proposed when analyzing the diaries of Zofia Nałkowska[308] seems pertinent. Although it was made with diaristic writing in mind, it can also be applied to autobiographical writing in general. Fitas distinguished four attitudes in diaristic writing, using four metaphors to describe them: window, mirror, lens and telescope.[309] The first metaphor, the window, illustrates the attitude of a witness to the world and chronicler of events. External reality provides the diarist with topics, pretexts and inspiration for writing. In the case of the second metaphor, the mirror, the subject of the statement is primarily the "I" of the writer, "the notes are about the 'I' of the person, seen as if from the outside, in a mirror image that creates distance and fosters a multifaceted 'self-view.'"[310] The third metaphor, the lens, describes a situation when the diarist's records of their private life are closely linked to general history. What is general, e.g., war, is processed through the lens of the personal. Macrohistory seeps into microhistory and becomes a private experience. In turn, the last metaphor, the telescope, is the opposite of the lens and focuses on private and personal reflections that tend toward generalizations. The concrete experience is extended to the outside world, and in this way, it goes beyond one's own ego to become the impetus for macroscopic reflection. In the case of bell hooks's texts, we seem to be dealing primarily with the metaphor of the telescope. Starting from a specific, private experience, the author moves on to a more general reflection on the public sphere. bell hooks applies similar rules in her autobiographical texts that she does in her books in general. Namely, she places a value on personal experience by positioning it as a starting point for more general reflection on social issues.

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[308] A. Fitas, *Zamiast eposu. Rzecz o „Dziennikach" Zofii Nałkowskiej*, Wydawnictwo KUL, Lublin 2011.

[309] I tackle this subject to a greater extent in the book D. Lalak, A. Ostaszewska, *Źródła do badań…*, pp. 74–76.

[310] A. Fitas, *Zamiast eposu…*, p. 42.

In her autobiographies, bell hooks uses a unique method of narration. In both *Bone Black…* and *Wounds of Passion…*, she describes her experiences sometimes in the first and sometimes in the third person. The shift from writing from the perspective of "I" to referring to herself as "her" seems to be primarily a psychological strategy. The author uses the third person when recounting difficult or even traumatic experiences that could be considered watershed events, turning points or even epiphanies.[311] The parts written from the third person perspective take on the characteristics of a witness/observer account, as if the linguistic distance was meant to provide her with the emotional distance necessary to analyze her past experience without reliving the emotions.

5.1.2. The temporal perspective of the narrative

The question of time in bell hooks's works is only seemingly an unimportant side issue. Diachrony is very significant for the course of her autobiographical story. She describes the events from her life in a diachronic order, i.e., focusing on their before/after relationships. When analyzing her own biographical experience, she does not refer to chronology, but takes into account the temporal order in which a certain event took place before or after another one.

The author adopts two different methods of treating time in her own biography. Two dimensions are simultaneously present in her texts: horizontal and vertical. In the vertical dimension of time, the main focus of her attention is the past. The narrator does not explicitly use the division into life stages, but it is not difficult to map them based on her texts, especially since bell hooks devoted two of the three books discussed here, *Bone Black…* and *Wounds of Passion…*, to specific periods of her life. In *Bone Black…*, she wrote about her childhood/girlhood and adolescence in Hopkinsville, while *Wounds of Passion…* cover the time of her college studies and the first phase of adulthood (until the age of 39).

[311] On epiphany in biography, see, among others, N. K. Denzin, *Interpretive Biography…*, pp. 70–71.

However, the past is not the only "area" featured in bell hooks's texts. The present tense dominates particularly in the essays collected in *Talking Back…* While reconstructing experiences from her life, the author simultaneously relates them to the present and reflects on them in a broader context by combining the vertical and horizontal dimensions. Biological and personal time intersects with historical time. Family life, going away to college, a romantic relationship with Mack and even experiences of loneliness are shown against the background of historical events, the most significant being the abolition of racial segregation and the emergence of the feminist movement.

In the case of *Bone Black…* and *Wounds of Passion…*, bell hooks does not write about her earlier life from the present-day perspective. However, she uses another interesting technique to describe her memories, alternating between the past and present tenses. In these two books, the past often appears as something that is recreated or even experienced again during its recollection in the here and now. In this way, the past becomes a memory that is still very much alive and important. The author's approach to the issue of time in her autobiographical story confirms that the relationships between the past, present and future are not exclusively linear. The past in bell hooks's autobiography is an open area, subject to a kind of updating, to being reconstructed again and again.

It is worth noting that in both autobiographies, the future appears as an anticipated vision of a better life. *Wounds of Passion…* end with the author leaving California and embarking on the "journey ahead," presumably heading to New Haven, where she is applying for a job at Yale University. The future appears to her as "something better."

5.1.3. The choice of experiences

As the narrator, bell hooks selects the experiences that she reconstructs in the course of the autobiographical story. Since she knows the story she is telling, she is free to rearrange the order of events in any way she wishes. The very choice of some events or experiences over others makes them significant for the story as a whole. The selection can be made by considering two criteria: objectivist

and subjectivist.[312] In the first case, the event/experience is chosen because it is important for the further course of the story. In contrast, using the subjectivist criterion means that the chosen event/experience has marked significance for the narrator (e.g., it represents a turning point in her biography).

One of the main themes in bell hooks's autobiographical texts are experiences of violence, both being a victim of violence—including child abuse—and being a witness to domestic violence (seeing her mother as a victim of her father). In each of the three books discussed here, the author recalls a specific event from her childhood: a night during which her father accuses her mother of cheating on him, threatens her with a gun and ultimately throws her out of the house. Being a witness to domestic violence marks GJW's life in a special way, not only engraving that scene in her memory, but, she says, changing her life forever. The result of this experience is a reflection on the relationship between father and mother, and in a broader context, between man and woman. GJW loses trust in the world. The example of her parents' marriage makes her strongly reject the idea of matrimony, which she sees primarily as a tool for the domination of man over woman.

bell hooks also recounts the experiences of being herself the victim of violence. Suffering physical and psychological abuse was a particularly common occurrence in GJW's childhood. When she was little, she was punished for any sign of disobedience. In *Wounds of Passion…*, bell hooks writes metaphorically: "The strap leaves its imprint on the flesh—tells a story I cannot hide."[313] The marks on her body left by the beating can be interpreted with reference to the title of the book as wounds that form a story of violence. These injuries were the result of GJW neglecting her domestic duties—instead of doing the work she was told to do, she spent her time reading books and writing poetry. By reading books, GJW learned to be reflective and think critically, which led to her wanting to have discussions with adults, despite

[312] The topic of selection criteria for experiences reconstructed in the narrative is dealt with, among others, in M. Nowak-Dziemianowicz, Narracja w pedagogice – znaczenie, badania, interpretacje, *Kultura i Edukacja*, 2014, 2(102), pp. 8–44.

[313] bell hooks, *Wounds of Passion…*, p. 7.

being denied the right to voice her opinion as a child. She experienced violence because she chose her passion over domestic duties. GJW did not want to give up reading books, even though she knew that her parents, especially her father, did not like her attitude. She was a child who did not listen to her parents and put books above everything else. For that, she was spanked—not just by her father, but by her mother as well. In addition to beatings, she was on occasion locked alone in a windowless room where she sat in the dark and silence. Sometimes she was also deprived of food or had her books, the items most precious to her, taken away from her.

Yet another type of violence was being threatened that reading books would lead to madness (mental illness) and cause her to be confined to a psychiatric hospital. Memories of these experiences also appear in all three books.

GJW experienced violence in her adult life too. It had both a real, physical dimension and a symbolic one, and accompanied her in social (public) spaces, as well as domestic (private) ones, including her relationship with a man. She was beaten by her partner several times. Those experiences cause bell hooks to revisit childhood memories; she recalls the scared little girl she was when her parents punished her. Looking in the mirror, she notices her resemblance to her mother and, she explains, the same kind of sadness that appears in the eyes of a woman who not only experiences domestic violence, but also tolerates it.

Another type of violence that bell hooks writes about is symbolic violence.[314] It involves the imposition by a certain social group of a specific way of seeing the world that is favorable to that group. Symbolic violence is devoid of the dimension of "reality"—unlike physical violence—and is based primarily on symbolic capital. Individuals/groups lacking this capital face violence, most often in elaborate forms, which is why the violence remains invisible, covert. bell hooks recounts the symbolic violence she suffered while studying

[314] The concept of symbolic violence was introduced by Pierre Bourdieu, see, among others, P. Bourdieu, Sur le pouvoir symbolique, *Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales*, 1977, 32(3), pp. 405–411.

at Stanford University. In the case of a Black woman from a working-class background, born in a rural region of Kentucky, it included the use of implicit mechanisms of oppression against her, such as depreciating her skills and value as a student, undermining her intellectual abilities or even judging her negatively on the basis of her background.

Symbolic violence manifests itself in the imposition of a system of norms and values that express the interests of the dominant classes while overlooking, devaluing and excluding other systems, especially those from the cultures of socially underprivileged groups (e.g., ethnic minorities). bell hooks's experiences illustrate the violence present in the education system and "applied" by/through that system. For example, there were no references to the history or culture of African Americans, i.e., GJW's origin group, in what she was taught at the university. A striking element of bell hooks's story about her studies is the feeling of being immersed in white culture that continues to accompany her even after she becomes involved in feminism. In women's studies courses, only white women's history is discussed, only white women writers are read, and "Blackness" does not exist except as some variation on the white experience.

An important dimension of symbolic violence, which appears already during early socialization, relates to issues of gender roles and gender relations. In bell hooks's writing, this dimension is revealed, for instance, in the story of her parents and their attitude toward marriage and family as the destiny and purpose of a (Black) woman's life.

In a culture based on male dominance, the two genders are treated as opposites. What is masculine is characterized by strength and independence, whereas femininity is associated with weakness/vulnerability and existing for others. From an early stage, girls are taught to see themselves as not only different, but also inherently weaker than boys. Gender relations are thus marked from the beginning by inequalities that later grow into an unassailable "normality." Symbolic violence, in this case, consists of treating these inequalities as legitimate and in line with tradition, and therefore unchangeable (because it has always been this way).

Symbolic violence occurs with the unwitting complicity of its victims. In a patriarchal society, they are predominantly women. In bell hooks's story, the central victim of symbolic violence is her mother, Rosa Bell Watkins.[315]

While recounting her childhood, bell hooks outlines the social context in which she grew up, which was not conducive to women's emancipation. The socialization of girls at that time had a very specific goal. For women born in the first half of the 20th century or earlier, there was only one socially acceptable "career" scenario: marriage and motherhood. A "white wedding" and having children were supposed to be the ultimate dream of every girl and woman. This kind of intergenerational transmission occurred especially in the mother--daughter relationship.

The mother was chiefly responsible to her husband, the direct representative of the patriarchy, for the socialization of their daughter. It was within the mother's duty to prepare her to fulfill the social expectations consistent with the image and role of women in the patriarchy.

> Mama seemed to accept the fact that I would never become a "real" woman, someone who would know how to take care of man and children.[316]

GJW's mother, as described by bell hooks, has two radically different faces. One is idealized, while the other is criticized. The one the narrator cherishes is a mother who is energetic and smiling, the woman her mother becomes the moment her father leaves the house. This is a mother who is tender and sensitive to poetry. Her second face is revealed with the return of the father. Then, according to the narrator, the joy in her eyes disappears and she falls silent: "She reminded her daughter of a dog sitting, standing obediently until the master, the head of the house, gave her orders to move, to do this, to do that."[317] The daughter does not accept her mother's submissiveness, especially

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[315] For more on women as victims of symbolic violence, see, among others, C. Hakim, Grateful Slaves and Self-Made Women. Fact and Fantasy in Women's Work Orientations, *European Sociological Review*, 1991, 7(2), pp. 101–121.

[316] bell hooks, *Wounds of Passion…*, p. x.

[317] bell hooks, *Bone Black…*, p. 98.

her passivity when the father uses violence against both his wife and their children. Frightened, the mother remains silent as the father beats the daughter. bell hooks writes: "The mama stood watching, afraid of this anger, afraid of what it might do, but too afraid to stop it."[318] It is incomprehensible to the daughter that her mother, a strong woman by day, accepts a subordinate role to a man in the evening. She tries to justify the behavior of a mother who, as bell hooks writes, is loyal primarily to her husband, not to her children. "In some way I understand that it has to do with marriage, that to be the wife to the husband she must be willing to sacrifice even her daughters for his good."[319] bell hooks recounts that every time she defied her mother, ever loyal to her father, she faced punishment. She explains her mother's behavior by her religiosity, and as the narrator, she thus offsets her anger:

> She has chosen. She has decided in his favor. She is a religious woman. She has been told that a man should obey god, that a woman should obey man, that children should obey their fathers and mothers, particularly their mothers. I will not obey.[320]

The disobedience that bell hooks writes about is the direct reason for the chastisement she experienced from both her father and mother.

Being a witness to violence and being its victim play important roles in bell hooks's autobiography. First of all, they are source experiences, which means that they not only influence the interpretation of her current life, but also have an impact on her vision of the future, shaping the protagonist's identity and her attitude to life. GJW does not intend to get married, she wants to devote her life to writing and become a poet. These source experiences cause the protagonist, already in childhood, to develop resilience strategies that enable her to overcome current difficulties and motivate her to build a coherent vision of herself and her future. These coping mechanisms—writing poetry

[318] Ibid., p. 30.
[319] Ibid., p. 151.
[320] Ibid.

and reading books—are interpreted by the narrator as an important, even integral part of her own developmental process.

The story of GJW's childhood and her relationship with her parents is linked with the story of her lifelong passion:

> For in that misunderstood childhood of mine, I found that sanctuary in poetry. It restored me, allowed me to come back from the space of woundedness and sadness to a recognition of beauty.[321]

The narrator explains that books and poetry were a way to forget, to escape from childhood experiences. "When whipped as a little girl shut away in a dark room, I calm myself with words. I learn poems and say them over and over again."[322] Poetry proves to be a key strategy for dealing with physical pain, anxiety and feeling lonely. In her texts, bell hooks describes in detail what helped her cope with the violence and oppression she faced both as a child and as an adult. By recounting her biographical experiences, she triggers an internal transformation. The story of suffering gains a new, emancipatory dimension. It becomes a "lesson" about herself.

> The beauty lies in the way it all comes together exposing and revealing the inner life of a girl inventing herself—creating the foundation of selfhood and identity that will ultimately lead to the fulfillment of her true destiny—becoming a writer.[323]

5.2. The biographical subject: a Black woman from Kentucky

According to Philippe Lejeune, the identity of the autobiographical subject is evidenced by the autobiographical pact: the unity of the author, the narrator and the protagonist of the story. In bell hooks's texts, the biographical subject is identical to the narrator and the

[321] bell hooks, *Wounds of Passion…*, p. 105.
[322] Ibid., p. 7.
[323] bell hooks, *Bone Black…*, p. xi.

author. They are the same person, even though the author uses a *nom de plume*.[324] The fundamental question posed in an autobiography by the subject is: Who am I? Who is the "I" that bell hooks talks about? Who is Gloria Jean Watkins as seen through her own eyes? What experiences make up her autobiography? What makes her unique? These are the questions I reflect on in this section.

I take as the principal statement of the subject in bell hooks's autobiography the oft-repeated phrase about being a Black woman from a poor working-class family, born in a small town in Kentucky. This sentence, in my opinion, can be interpreted in two non-exclusive ways. First, as the primary (self-)determinant of GJW's identity—her race, sex/gender, class and social status—and second, as a vantage point from which the author speaks as the subject of her biography. This is the standpoint from which she not only interprets her own biography, but also analyzes the relationship between herself and the surrounding reality. The elements of GJW's identity are the matter and, at the same time, a component of her autobiographical experience. They are what makes up the "I" that is narrated, thus creating the biographical subject. For the most part, they include the experiences of being Black, a woman and from a socially underprivileged class.

The subject's autobiographical experience also consists of her individual characteristics: her emotions and personality traits. The emotion that GJW feels most often is sadness—the sadness of a little girl and the sadness of an adult woman. It stems primarily from a sense of loneliness and arises when recalling memories of the mother and the relationship with her.

GJW's autobiography is comprised of experiences that I referred to in the previous section as source experiences. I included among them primarily the experience of violence. Relationships with other people are the main component here, and also an autonomous category. These are experiences which the biographical subject shares with those who are significant to them and whose presence affects

[324] According to Lejeune, the use of a pseudonym does not undermine the author's identity. It is, after all, a name chosen by the author: "The pseudonym is simply a differentiation, a division of the name, which changes nothing in the identity." P. Lejeune, *On Autobiography*…, p. 12.

the course and meaning of the experience in the biographical subject's assessment. In GJW's case, relational experiences are mainly those which feature and are co-created by her mother.

5.2.1. The feeling of loneliness: the relationship with the mother

The figure of the mother plays a significant role in GJW's life and in bell hooks's writing. In the very first sentence of *Bone Black…*, the daughter brings up a memory of her mother: "Mama has given me a quilt from her hope chest."[325] The day when she opens the chest where she keeps precious mementos and wedding gifts—among them a quilt, which she then gives to her daughter—is one of the few serene memories of the mother. At that moment, GJW experiences a sense of closeness to her mother, who shares her story with her, opens the chest in her presence and gifts her the quilt. The memory is so important that it becomes a metaphor for bell hooks's autobiographical writing.[326] It also provides an introduction, full of rich symbolism, to the history of Black women and the ties that bind them, especially mothers and daughters.

There is a peculiar aspect to the author's memories of her mother. Namely, the tangency (correlation?) that exists between these memories and the descriptions of childhood loneliness and sadness. Memories of the mother seem to intermingle with those of loneliness and evoke just such emotional states. In GJW's case, it also appears that the difficult bond with her mother, the mutual disappointments and the concurrent need for closeness and understanding exacerbate the daughter's sense of loneliness, which consists of feeling disaffected, misunderstood and sometimes alienated from her own family.

Especially during adolescence, GJW experiences rejection and criticism from both her parents and siblings. From her account, one can tell she feels like a pariah in her home. "I hear again and again

[325] bell hooks, *Bone Black…*, p. 1.

[326] bell hooks also writes about this in *Talking Back…* See the previous section.

that I am crazy, that I will end up in a mental institution."[327] Her resistance and confrontational attitude ("talking back") are perceived as spite and disobedience to her parents. Her punishment is spending many hours in isolation in a dark room. The domestic situation prompts GJW to escape into the world of books. It is in this world that she feels at home and at peace with herself. Paradoxically, however, this "escape" makes the sense of loneliness even greater.

GJW suffers due to a lack of understanding on the part of her mother, in whose opinion she is a difficult child. This is especially clear in the recollection of the mother's stay in the hospital. When the mother is hospitalized, doctors give her no chance of survival. GJW is the only one of her siblings who refuses to say goodbye to her. She does not want to visit her mother in the hospital because she does not want to remember her as sick and doomed to die in a foreign place. She wants to see and remember her mother as healthy and bustling around the house. However, the mother perceives her daughter's absence as disrespectful and disobedient.[328] GJW's awareness that she can't explain the reasons for her behavior causes an emotional distance to appear between her and her mother, and her sense of loneliness grows.

GJW reveals her love for her mother in painful childhood memories. These experiences are critical in the sense that they change GJW's life. As the author and protagonist of the autobiography says, her life will never be the same again.[329] These memories are related to violence. The first one deals with her father's violence against her mother, the second with her mother's violence against her.

Recalling the events, bell hooks reconstructs the bond with her mother. Once again, she is a daughter concerned about her mother's life. One night, she witnesses a fight between her parents. After returning home, her father accuses her mother of infidelity, threatens her with a gun and orders her to move out of the house. The daughter hears her father shouting and insulting her mother. "He reaches

[327] bell hooks, *Bone Black…*, p. 101.
[328] Ibid., p. 144.
[329] Ibid., p. 152.

the porch yelling and screaming at the woman inside—yelling that she is his wife, he can do with her what he wants."[330] The mother does not protest nor object to her husband's decision. Crying, she explains that she is innocent and obediently packs her things in a bag. The daughter stands up for her. That night, she leaves the house with her. She cannot imagine life without her mother. "I tell her that I want to die before her, that I cannot live without her."[331]

The second memory concerns direct violence between mother and daughter. The mother tells her daughter repeatedly that she is punishing her for her own good. However, on one occasion, GJW defies her mother when the latter wants to hit her again. GJW grabs the switch that the mother holds in her hand and attempts to take a swing at her. At the last moment, she refrains from hitting her mother. The latter stands still in surprise, unable to believe that her daughter could hit her. GJW remembers her mother's words: "She tells me that I must never *ever* as long as I live raise my hand against my mother."[332] The daughter replies that she does not have a mother. Then the enraged woman flogs her daughter once more.

> This time I am still. This time I cry. I see the hurt in her eyes when I say I do not have a mother. I am ready to be punished. My desire was to stop the pain, not to hurt. I am ashamed and torn. I do not want to stand still and be punished but I never want to hurt mama. It is better to hurt than to cause her pain.[333]

The mother warns her daughter that she will tell her father about the whole incident and that he will punish her again. GJW feels betrayed. "I cannot understand her acts of betrayal. I cannot understand that she must be against me to be for him. He and I are strangers."[334]

That night, GJW realizes that nothing will ever be the same again between her and her mother. Although over the next few days they both act as if nothing has happened, GJW knows that they are

[330] Ibid., p. 146.
[331] Ibid., p. 140.
[332] Ibid., p. 152.
[333] Ibid.
[334] Ibid.

both hiding their pain. This event not only deepens GJW's feelings of loneliness, but also her guilt. "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."[335]

GJW's mother is an example of the kind of mother about whom Adrienne Rich writes, "it is the mother through whom patriarchy early teaches the small female her proper expectations,"[336] thus marking the mother-daughter relationship with guilt. "Proper expectations" are nothing more than an acceptance of gender inequality, both in the family and in public life. The mother wants to protect her daughter from disappointments in the future and at the same time prepares her to meet expectations that limit her subjectivity.

"We learn early that it is important for a woman to marry,"[337] bell hooks admits. This life lesson is served, among other things, by playing with dolls during childhood. At a later age comes the time for real-life responsibilities, namely housework. bell hooks describes herself as an adolescent: "Her mother is telling her again and again about the importance of learning to cook, clean, etc., in order to be a good wife."[338] However, GJW does not want to get married. She confesses to her mother that "… marriage is for men, … women get nothing out of it, men get everything."[339] Even when talking about her aversion to marriage, she still does not want her mother to know that it is her parents' marriage that has made her see it as a trap she wants to avoid. bell hooks writes: "Whatever joy there was in marriage was something the women kept to themselves, a secret they did not share with one another or their daughters."[340]

The protagonist's attitude described in *Bone Black…* is an example of matrophobia, or the fear of becoming one's own mother. GJW does not want to repeat her mother's life scenario. By observing her life, she

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[335] Ibid., p. 140.

[336] A. Rich, *Of Woman Born. Motherhood as Experience and Institution*, Bantam Books, New York 1977, p. 243.

[337] bell hooks, *Bone Black…*, p. 22.

[338] Ibid., p. 97.

[339] Ibid., p. 98.

[340] Ibid.

learns what she does not want to be. Above all, she refuses to limit her subjectivity. The mother thus becomes a negative role model for GJW. The daughter takes negative identification, or disidentification with her mother, as the starting point for defining her own identity.

5.2.2. The art of quilting: the relationship with the grandmother

An example of positive identification with a woman is GJW's relationship with her maternal grandmother.[341] In her eyes, the grandmother is a warrior, one of the few Black women who is not afraid to speak up and who uses blunt language. GJW sees similarities between herself and her grandmother. "She tells me that she has inherited this fighting spirit from her mother, that I may have a little of it but it is too early to tell."[342]

The grandmother is a symbolic figure in bell hooks's autobiography. She symbolizes female wisdom and independence. She is an essential part of the archetypal triad, which consists of three generations of women: the grandmother, the mother and the daughter. The relationship between the oldest and the youngest of the women does not resemble the bond between the mother and the daughter. The granddaughter considers the grandmother an authority not because she is forced to by obedience to the elderly but because of the latter's strong personality and charisma. The grandmother is the woman GJW/bell hooks admires the most.

The illiterate grandmother is known for her stories, especially about her ancestors, which she tells her granddaughter.[343] "She tells me that a person cannot feel right in their heart if they have denied

[341] GJW's grandmother was actually named Sarah; however, in *Bone Black…*, bell hooks calls her Saru. See bell hooks, *Bone Black…*, p. xiv.

[342] Ibid., p. 53. This is a reference to the pseudonym adopted by GJW (bell hooks), which is the name of her great-grandmother.

[343] Clarissa Pinkola Estés writes that the archetypal Old Woman knows all about the female gender since she created the first woman from a wrinkle on her foot. *La Que Sabe* (She Who Knows) preserves tradition. She is as eternal as time; she resides in the female consciousness. She has within her the power of transformation and rebirth. She unites activity, wisdom and natural instincts, the deepest,

parts of their ancestral past."[344] GJW learns the stories to pass them on and in the process learns to appreciate the past.

GJW learns the art of storytelling from her grandmother whilst learning the art of making patchwork quilts. It involves sewing together old pieces of fabric, usually cut into small squares. Making quilts is a typically feminine activity, especially popular among women of African-American descent. Meeting to sew together gives them the opportunity to be in a women's group and share stories with one another. For this reason, it is regarded as a way to deepen bonds between women, especially between mothers and daughters. bell hooks, however, identifies the making of the bedspread not with the mother, but with the grandmother. Her grandmother is the woman who passes on to her the tradition of quilting.

bell hooks compares making quilts to the art of storytelling, which seems to bring her even closer to her grandmother. Each piece of material used for the quilt comes from a different source, and therefore represents a different story. The same is true of autobiography. Just as a quilt is made up of many small pieces of fabric, an autobiography is made up of small, often fragmented memories put together.[345]

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most valuable mental qualities associated with femininity. See C. P. Estés, *Women Who Run with the Wolves*, Ballantine Books, New York 1992, p. 25.

[344] bell hooks, *Bone Black…*, p. 49.

[345] Another metaphor, weaving, is invoked by Nancy K. Miller when analyzing the tropes of female literary activity. Starting from Roland Barthes's statement that a text is like a fabric, Miller constructs her concept of women's writing, which she calls arachnology. For more on this topic, see A. Ostaszewska, Własny pokój jako przestrzeń pracy twórczej. Refleksje na temat przestrzeni w doświadczeniach kobiet [in:] *Współczesne przestrzenie pracy*, K. Rychlicka-Maraszek (ed.), Difin, Warszawa 2016, pp. 58–59.

6. Reception and criticism: bell hooks's self-empowerment

Self-empowerment is both a goal and a result of the "process of becoming" that takes place during biographical work, that is, a reflection on one's own biography. In the case of bell hooks, her self-empowerment is expressed in her autobiographical texts. I begin the conclusions of my analysis by presenting the author's own reflections on the process of writing an autobiography.

6.1. Writing autobiography as writing oneself

A special place in bell hooks's autobiography is occupied by a reflection on autobiographical writing. The author admits that it involved the need to organize biographical experiences and give coherence to her own life. She undertook the process of writing her autobiography several times.

> Until I began to try and write an autobiography, I thought that it would be a simple task this telling of one's story. And yet I tried year after year, never writing more than a few pages.[346]

The biggest difficulties were related to starting the writing process itself: "The longer it took me to begin the process of writing autobiography, the further removed from those memories I was becoming."[347]

[346] bell hooks, *Talking Back…*, p. 155.
[347] Ibid., p. 156.

The problem turned out to be memory, in which individual memories are contained and where they are susceptible to various distortions. For this reason, bell hooks assumes that all autobiographical stories are partly fictional. Another issue was openness and readiness to tell her story. The author admits that she felt a kind of internal barrier.

> Secrecy and silence—these were central issues. Secrecy about family, about what went on in the domestic household was a bond between us—was part of what made us family. There was a dread one felt about breaking that bond.[348]

At the same time, she writes, she felt the need to tell her story. It was a way to not so much reckon with the past as reconcile with it.

> The longing to tell one's story and the process of telling is symbolically a gesture of longing to recover the past in such a way that one experiences both a sense of reunion and a sense of release. It was the longing for release that compelled the writing but concurrently it was the joy of reunion that enabled me to see that the act of writing one's autobiography is a way to find again that aspect of self and experience that may no longer be an actual part of one's life but is a living memory shaping and informing the present. Autobiographical writing was a way for me to evoke the particular experience of growing up southern and black in segregated communities. It was a way to recapture the richness of southern black culture.[349]

She sees in the process of writing the potential for her self-development. Reconstructing the past is an opportunity to reconstruct herself.

> Writing the autobiographical narrative enabled me to look at my past from a different perspective and to use this knowledge as a means of self-growth and change in a practical way.[350]

When commenting on the process of writing autobiography, bell hooks also analyzes the functions of her writing. She attributes to autobiography the function of personal, but also social and collective

[348] Ibid.
[349] Ibid., p. 158.
[350] Ibid., p. 159.

memory. She realizes that her childhood memories are unique, as they talk about a world that is gone. The places where she grew up no longer exist.

> Black southern folk experience was the foundation of the life around me when I was a child; that experience no longer exists in many places where it was once all of life that we knew. Capitalism, upward mobility, assimilation of other values have all led to rapid disintegration of black folk experience or in some cases the gradual wearing away of that experience.[351]

The melancholic mood is enhanced by the story of the community to which the author belonged as a child. It is a community of people telling and listening to autobiographical stories.

> Within the world of my childhood, we held onto the legacy of a distinct black culture by listening to the elders tell their stories. Autobiography was experienced most actively in the art of telling one's story. I can recall sitting at Baba's (my grandmother on my mother's side) at 1200 Broad Street—listening to people come and recount their life experience. In those days, whenever I brought a playmate to my grandmother's house, Baba would want a brief outline of their autobiography before we would begin playing. She wanted not only to know who their people were but what their values were.[352]

bell hooks also recognizes the value of autobiography as an archive of memories of her girlhood and growing up. She writes:

> It is the absence of such a tradition in my adult life that makes the written narrative of my girlhood all the more important. As the years pass and these glorious memories grow much more vague, there will remain the clarity contained within the written words.[353]

From a conceptual standpoint, she compares her autobiography to a hope chest in which her mother stored valuables and gifts. Just as her mother put items precious to her in a chest, she puts precious stories from her life into her autobiography.

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[351] Ibid., p. 158.
[352] Ibid.
[353] Ibid.

> Conceptually, the autobiography was framed in the manner of a hope chest. I remembered my mother's hope chest, with its wonderful odor of cedar and thought about her taking the most precious items and placing them there for safekeeping. Certain memories were for me a similar treasure. I wanted to place them somewhere for safekeeping. An autobiographical narrative seemed an appropriate place. Each particular incident, encounter, experience had its own story, sometimes told from the first person, sometimes told from the third person.[354]

While writing, she discovers that she does not have to deny her past and who she was—Gloria Jean Watkins:

> It was clearly the Gloria Jean of my tormented and anguished childhood that I wanted to be rid of, the girl who was always wrong, always punished, always subjected to some humiliation or other, always crying, the girl who was to end up in a mental institution because she could not be anything but crazy, or so they told her. … By writing the autobiography, it was not just this Gloria I would be rid of, but the past that had a hold on me, that kept me from the present. I wanted not to forget the past but to break its hold. This death in writing was to be liberatory.[355]

Writing an autobiography has taught bell hooks to assemble her story from small memories. This process allows her to take control of her own past and therefore gain a sense of agency:

> In writing about her [Gloria—AO], I reclaimed that part of myself I had long ago rejected, left uncared for, just as she had often felt alone and uncared for as a child. Remembering was part of a cycle of reunion, a joining of fragments, "the bits and pieces of my heart" that the narrative made whole again.[356]

Ultimately, biographical work enables the author to reach an understanding with herself. This is how bell hooks sums up writing an autobiography:

> In the end I did not feel as though I had killed the Gloria of my childhood. Instead I had rescued her. She was no longer the enemy within, the little girl who had to be annihilated for the woman to come into being.[357]

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[354] Ibid., pp. 158–159.
[355] Ibid., p. 155.
[356] Ibid., p. 159.
[357] Ibid.

She sees the process of writing an autobiography as a developmental process in the sense that it enabled an identity change: a transformation from Gloria Jean Watkins to bell hooks.

6.2. "I was mapping a different destiny": the process of becoming

Biographical work is an essential tool for self-empowerment. The material here are one's own biographical experiences, which ultimately take the form of an autobiographical story. For bell hooks, writing was an activity of choice, an expression of the search for possible ways to express herself and communicate with herself and the outside world. This type of activity is subjective, as it is performed independently and according to one's own preferences. It not only testifies to the need for agency and control over one's own life, but is also its manifestation.

Biographical work involves the development of self-knowledge and awareness of one's own potential. It also manifests itself in the pursuit of continuously fulfilling this potential, which can be described as self-development. Its goal is achieving a sense of subjectivity and self-empowerment. In the case of bell hooks, this primarily means, to use her term, realizing the ability to speak with her own voice. Constructing herself in speech, through acts of speech, became for bell hooks the linguistic equivalent of feeling comfortable in her own skin. She verbalizes her premise thus: "I was mapping a different destiny."

6.2.1. The autobiographical potential

How does the process of writing autobiography and reflecting on one's biographical experience become a tool in the process of self-empowerment? Writing her autobiography is a chance for bell hooks to look back on and interpret her own experiences, including the determinants of her own development. At the same time, it allows her to (re)construct herself, relying on her autobiographical potential. In her case, this potential consists primarily of:

– family transmission, especially historical transmission, which includes her own ancestors and emerges from close ties with her mother and grandmother
– belonging to an African-American group of origin and having a strong sense of connection to African-American culture, which is expressed in an interest in the group's history and culture, and also in the conscious incorporation into her own identity of the elements constituting the distinctiveness of that culture. bell hooks defines herself as a Black woman
– personal experiences, both positive and negative, as well as transformative and meaningful life events and moments. These include experiences of violence and oppression.

For bell hooks, tapping into the experiences from her own biography serves an important function: "to illuminate and transform the present."[358] In less metaphorical terms—to use Peter Alheit's phrase—this is nothing less than biographical learning. According to his thesis, human beings remain in a continuous learning process, which encompasses all aspects of life. The capacity for development, or in other words, the developmental potential which generally makes one's own biography a space for biographical work, is what Alheit calls biographicity. It consists of "key qualifications," which in turn act as a metacapital in individual learning processes.[359]

In the case of bell hooks, the key qualifications are, first and foremost, the coping strategies she developed during the course of her life to deal with difficult experiences. In childhood and adolescence, it was her passion for reading and writing poetry that enabled GJW to go beyond the constraints of her home and environment. Over time, this passion became her main life plan: to become a poet. To achieve this, GJW went to college. Her departure for university also had another motive. It was a literal and symbolic escape from her home, where she felt misunderstood and experienced physical and psychological violence. She also experienced symbolic violence during her studies, when she was one of the few Black students at Stanford University.

[358] bell hooks, *Yearning…*, p. 147.
[359] P. Alheit, The Concept of "Biographicity"…

The feminist consciousness became the immunizing factor at that time, as expressed in bell hooks's first book, *Ain't I a Woman…* Through writing—first poetry, then feminist theory—GJW became bell hooks, the woman and author she had always wanted to be.

6.2.2. To speak with her own voice

The need for self-empowerment and the pursuit of agency are expressed, among other things, in the willingness to decide about one's own life, that is, to "map one's own destiny." In bell hooks's case, this appears rooted in her feminist consciousness. She sees her own experiences as traces of this consciousness taking form. The liberating element in this process is "speaking with her own voice."

bell hooks organizes and orders her experiences in a reflective way. She gives them a certain narrative and temporal structure so that they gain biographical coherence. She writes:

> The beauty lies in the way it all comes together exposing and revealing the inner life of a girl inventing herself—creating the foundation of selfhood and identity that will ultimately lead to the fulfillment of her true destiny—becoming a writer.[360]

Recalling memories can be accompanied by pain, but "this pain could be a constructive sign of growth."[361] While reconstructing her autobiography, bell hooks recalls numerous experiences of violence: from being a child victim of domestic abuse to her decision to move to California and end her relationship with Mack. As she states, "… there is no healing in silence."[362]

6.2.3. Stigma as a developmental category

Self-empowerment involves breaking the biographical patterns available to the individual within his or her living environment and

[360] bell hooks, *Bone Black…*, p. xi.

[361] bell hooks, *Talking Back…*, p. 103.

[362] bell hooks, *Sisters of the Yam. Black Women and Self-Recovery*, South End Press, Boston 1993, p. 25.

social structures (family, community, etc.).[363] Within the biographical pattern, the course of an individual's life is influenced by the environment and social institutions—school, community, etc.—and linked to the categories of gender, race and social class. For bell hooks, these patterns include examples of the life course of her family—especially her mother—as well as other members of the African-American community, who are functioning in the day-to-day realities of racial segregation and experiencing oppression because of the color of their skin. Thus, it can be concluded that self-empowerment is the result of the breaking of biographical patterns and is expressed in defining oneself in terms of a subject, both in the individual (having the right to self-determination) and in the political sense (enjoying the status of a full citizen and member of society).

Self-empowerment developed in the course of biographical work is also associated with a critical attitude to and contestation of one's own heritage, or the biographical potential accumulated by previous generations. This potential can be negative when it involves family dysfunctionality and/or stigma due to origin, among other things. Its negative character can be manifested at the individual and societal levels, for instance, in the form of experiencing violence, low economic status or stigma due to skin color.[364] Biographical work, in this case, consists of a conscious decision to become someone different from the people in the immediate environment, who are the available role models. bell hooks does not want to be like her mother, a victim of the patriarchy, or like other women whose life fulfillment is to be a wife and mother. She does not want to be like other Black students assimilating into white supremacist culture and forgetting their own

[363] I adopt the concept of biographical pattern after Edward Hajduk, who writes: "The pattern of biography (life course) is a normative component of the culture of a large social group … The pattern of biography postulates the phases of the life course of its realizers, the critical (important, breakthrough) events in their lives. Each life course pattern is distinguished from every other in the aforementioned respects." This pattern differs from the professional career pattern. See E. Hajduk, Status ontologiczny wzorów biografii, *Rocznik Lubuski*, 2015, 41(1), p. 9.

[364] The English term "stigma of Blackness" denotes stigma due to skin color and former slave status.

origins, or like Blacks who self-exclude by dropping out of college due to their low symbolic and economic capital.

The case of bell hooks's biography reveals how self-empowerment—redefining the subject's status—involves the reworking of a negative biographical experience into capital, and therefore into something that can become a source of a sense of agency and dignity. bell hooks sees in family and community transmission the potential for identity formation and, at the same time, emancipation. Stories about one's own ancestors, told by the grandmother and mother during the daughter's adolescence, constitute capital, primarily in the form of awareness. GJW's grandmother, by passing on to her stories about her great-grandmother (Bell Blair Hooks), offered a concrete vision of womanhood and an emancipation strategy. This is what speaking with one's own voice means, which in some situations can even be regarded as verbal disobedience—the "talking back" mentioned in the title of one of her books. However, the most visible legacy from her ancestors is the pseudonym, bell hooks, adopted in honor of her great-grandmother.

The transmission of family history, which reaches GJW at an early age, is a moral message about the values of a particular social group, which includes not only what is commendable, worth cultivating and remembering, but also what can be described as a "series of humiliating experiences."[365]

GJW's family were African Americans living under racial segregation, working manual labor jobs and residing in a poor Hopkinsville neighborhood. They were illiterate or semi-illiterate, like her beloved grandmother. bell hooks's ancestors had a past of slavery, and her grandparents had continued to work as servants in the homes of white middle-class Americans, even into old age. Their memories of difficult experiences of racial discrimination and violence, like those of other African Americans with a past of slavery, are a silent part of the intergenerational and intra-family transmission. Although their humiliating experiences of discrimination based on skin color have not been verbalized, it does not mean that those memories do not exist.

[365] I refer to the category created by Catherine Delcroix.

On the contrary, they have taken the form of resentment and fear. They have become a cause for social self-exclusion. The parents' silence about their own history is not without significance for the process of raising their children. Instead of a strategy for coping with difficult experiences, children receive a non-verbal message of powerlessness and lack of agency. Being given a sense of agency, on the other hand, would have enabled an identity change, i.e., a change in the way they think about themselves: from a powerless, repressed victim to a subject who has a sense of control over their own memory.

6.2.4. The processual nature of self-empowerment

Self-empowerment requires biographical work. This process is lengthy and does not proceed in a steady or straightforward manner. Although its course is not a trajectory,[366] it is subject to certain life dynamics. It is an intentional process that requires a certain amount of attention or vigilance, as well as readiness to make changes in a predetermined course of action according to the changing conditions. Its components include self-reflexivity and critical awareness, both in relation to oneself and in relation to the environment and other participants in everyday social and family life. This process of "mapping one's own destiny" engages at the subjective level, but also at the level of socio-structural relations and, what is of particular importance in the case of bell hooks, at the level of lasting intra-family relations.

The core value that appears in GJW's intra-family message is family. GJW repeatedly hears that family is not just the most important thing—it is simply everything. Raised in the cult of family, she experiences ambivalent emotions when she decides to go to study in California. Eventually, her intellectual ambitions prevail and she leaves. Even so, the themes of family and origin dominate in her autobiographical reflections.

[366] The most widespread concept of trajectory in the social sciences was introduced by Gerhard Riemann and Fritz Schütze. According to them, trajectory refers to the study of chaotic, disorderly and unstructured processes, which cause suffering and evoke a sense of defeat, misery. Trajectory brings with it despair, a sense of helplessness and fear, leading to a breakdown of the existing order.

During her college years, GJW feels guilty about leaving home and being away from her family. This distance is not only spatial, but also emotional. While GJW wants to be loyal to her family and community, she also wants to pursue her intellectual plans and dreams of being a writer. Although the need for self-empowerment and emancipation turns out to be stronger than the moral obligation to the family ("family comes first"), bell hooks still fulfills that obligation. A manifestation of loyalty is her self-definition in terms of her group of origin, repeated in her autobiographical works, "Black working-class woman from a small town in Kentucky." It can be interpreted as a need for self-affirmation, perpetuating in this way an image of herself that would be consistent with a commitment to family and community. The repeated recalling of memories from her childhood and youth in her texts also seems to have the function of maintaining the memory of one's own history and origins, thus sustaining the symbolic bond with one's family.

The memories that bell hooks recounts are dominated by a sad and nostalgic, not to say depressive, mood. Undoubtedly, this is related to the guilt over breaking the prohibition imposed on her by her parents, namely, the prohibition on writing/talking to "strangers" about her own family. A sort of way out of this situation is adopting a writing pseudonym. By choosing to write under the name bell hooks, GJW continues to be part of the family environment in which she was raised. Not only does she indicate the permanence of the family values that constitute her heritage, but she also remains loyal to her family. At the same time, as an author-writer, she is honest with herself, that is, she writes openly about her life.

6.3. Levels of autobiographical expression

As Daniel Bertaux argues, each autobiographical narrative provides information and indicators of phenomena at three different levels: the level of the interior of the storyteller, the level of the history of enduring relationships with parents and relatives, and the level of social-structural relations inherent in the social world.

At the level of the interior of the storyteller, this is information about emotions, views, plans and values and their transformation in the course of life, which brings new experiences and critical events. In the case of GJW, these are primarily experiences of violence and oppression, as well as breakthrough events, such as going away to college and the ensuing disillusionment with student life and university culture, as well as the process of writing and publishing her first book. bell hooks describes in her texts the thoughts and emotions that accompanied the various events in her life. The author reconstructs her biography in a malleable way, referring to the emotional and intellectual sphere.

At the level of the history of enduring relationships with parents and relatives, this is mostly information about experiences and events from childhood and adolescence, as well as the first phase of adulthood. It is then that GJW, after leaving the family home, becomes fully financially independent, begins her studies and academic career, and enters into a long-term relationship with Mack. The information reveals the durability of her emotional bond with her mother despite the spatial distance separating them, while at the same time attests to the loosening of ties with other family members, especially her father. Her visits to the family home are driven by the desire to see her mother. Her father appears in the memoirs of bell hooks as a secondary and negative figure. The author admits that she does not feel the need for closeness with him, and they do not talk to each other. Their relationship can be described as cool, based on tolerating each other's presence. She still resents her father for his attitude toward her mother and family.

In bell hooks's narrative, the topic of family and the relationship with parents occupies an important place. She repeatedly returns to childhood memories and focuses on them. In addition to the theme of emotional and psychological ties, there is also the thread of mutual moral obligations. On the other hand, bell hooks's sisters and brother appear in her stories sporadically and usually collectively (as siblings, without being mentioned individually by name). The author admits that she did not have a close relationship with her sisters due to the age difference between them. Of all her siblings, she has the greatest

affection for her younger brother, with whom she played during her early childhood.

bell hooks also recalls memories that show the positive impact of the community, especially in terms of intergenerational transmission. Despite the passage of time, she refers to the history and culture of the Black South and the Black community, which remain for her a source of cultural identity.

On the level of socio-structural relations, in turn, bell hooks's autobiographies primarily reveal her interest in socio-structural arrangements and their broad cultural and historical context. To describe these relations, she creates her own category, "imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy." The author takes a critical stance toward the patriarchal social order, capitalism, white supremacy and knowledge-power relations, criticizing, among other things, the education and university systems. Although her statements refer to a specific political-geographical context—she focuses on the American society—her texts can serve as a point of reference for more general reflections.

6.4. Types of reality

Two basic types of reality can be distinguished in bell hooks's texts: historical-empirical and discursive. The former consists of autobiographical facts, that is, information of a factual nature, and the latter is a narrative, a story about her life.

The historical-empirical reality manifests itself in two ways: firstly, as facts about the life of the author of the autobiography, and secondly, as external facts that concern the general historical context of the subject's life. In her texts, bell hooks refrains from presenting any timestamps related to her biography. Thus, she does not provide her date of birth nor other dates regarding, for example, her high school or college graduation, obtaining her doctoral degree, etc. The only timestamp—still only used sporadically—is a reference to her age. She writes, for example, that she came to California to study at the age of 19. Due to the lack of "absolute" dating, i.e., the lack of specific dates, bell hooks's approach to time seems more diachronic than

chronological. The author reflects on the events of her life by taking into account the order of their occurrence—indicating that something happened before or after something else. It is therefore difficult to reconstruct the factual layer of her biography on the basis of her texts. The same is true of her external reality because bell hooks does not provide dating or factual details of the various historical events to which she refers.

The external reality—the historical-empirical reality in Bertaux's terms—is conditioned by a number of environmental, political and social factors independent of the subject. They co-create the background of her life and therefore affect the context of her writing. For bell hooks, this reality consists primarily of the fact that she was born in the early 1950s, a period of economic boom in America, and simultaneously, a period of growing cultural and social tensions.[367] Although there are references to historical events in her texts, they are just mentioned in passing or hinted at. She focuses more on reconstructing her personal experiences during that period. The socio-political events of the time are commented on when they affect the author's life directly. The 29-year time span between 1952 and 1981 covered by bell hooks's texts analyzed in this book encompasses many complex and varied social transformations of American society. Those that appear in her books and largely form their historical-empirical reality concern the same period, namely the 1960s and 1970s, and include racial segregation and desegregation, as well as the emergence of the feminist movement.

Bertaux claims that it is possible to distinguish a third type of reality in autobiographical statements, the so-called "intermediate" type. This is the mental and semantic reality, or "the reality in the head."

This reality, created by the storyteller/narrator on the basis of memories and reflections, is located "in the head," and as an internal reality, it exists only for the subject. Its condition and functioning depend on a number of factors, including, among others, memory, intellectual ability, reflexivity or the vision one has of oneself and

[367] In 1952, Republican Dwight Eisenhower won the presidential election, and in 1954, the Supreme Court abolished racial segregation in schools.

the world. It is this reality that constitutes the self-reflective story, i.e., what the subjects "tell" primarily to themselves. This type of story is subject to reflection and is constantly reconstructed. It can even be metaphorically described as a kind of inverted palimpsest—a story that is created by putting subsequent layers on top of earlier ones. It is a story that is complemented and revised in a perpetual process of reconstruction. Unlike the other levels of reality, it remains accessible only to the subject, as it is constructed exclusively "in their head" and primarily for their needs. It can nevertheless be made available, to some extent and in some form, to the outside world—to other people—through narration.

In the case of bell hooks, the autobiographical story that emerges from her psychic and semantic reality becomes available to the outside world as an autobiography, a story in text form. In contrast to the story that exists only "in the head," the one published in the form of a book gains a permanent, closed character and is no longer subject to the slightest correction or authorial/editorial interference. The author thus agrees to enclose it in specific language and specific sentences.

6.5. Stages of biographical work

Anselm Strauss distinguishes four processes that make up a biographical work: contextualization, reconciliation, identity reconstruction and biography transformation. Each of these processes can be identified in the biographical work of bell hooks. The first consists of the author incorporating, in the course of the story, further experiences and reflecting on them. In her subsequent texts, bell hooks not only introduces completely new themes, but also develops some of those mentioned in earlier books. This is the case, for example, of the violence she experienced as a child. In subsequent stories that refer to it, new elements and a new reflection appear. New in the sense that although the experience has already been recounted, it is rethought again from the author's current perspective.

The second process of biographical work distinguished by Strauss involves understanding and accepting the biographical consequences

of contextualized experiences. The next one relates to identity and its reconstruction on the basis of new knowledge about oneself. This knowledge includes elements referring to the sense of identity,[368] social identity,[369] narrative identity,[370] etc. For bell hooks, this process addresses two important issues. First, incorporating new elements of self-knowledge into a dynamically reconstructed self-image—e.g., embracing feminist consciousness as an identity marker—and second, forming a writing identity and adopting a pseudonym.

The last process of biographical work is the transformation of biography and its subject. In the case of bell hooks, two levels of such transformation can be identified. The first concerns the direct, concrete changes that she describes in her texts. For example, the last of the analyzed autobiographies, *Wounds of Passion…*, ends with a reference to the beginning of a new stage in her life. After 12 years, the author decides to end her relationship with Mack and embarks on a journey alone.[371] She recalls the Gospel story of Jesus's forty days in the desert, which can be understood as a metaphor for spiritual transformation. Her self-image also undergoes a transformation during this time. She makes important life choices.

In contrast, the second level of transformation that results from

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[368] After Maria Sokolik, I understand the sense of identity as a sense of one's own individual existence, a subjective feeling of who I am, what I am like. For more, see M. Sokolik, *Kliniczna problematyka poczucia tożsamości*, Wydawnictwa Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, Warszawa 1988.

[369] Social identity consists of an individual's identifications with specific social groups ("we"). These identifications can be formed on the basis of such categories as gender, age, nationality, religion, political affiliation, professional affiliation, etc. On the subject of social identity, see, among others, Z. Bokszański, *Tożsamość, interakcja, grupa*, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Łódzkiego, Łódź 1989 and Z. Bokszański, *Tożsamości zbiorowe*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, Warszawa 2005.

[370] Narrative identity is an identity constructed in the course of a story. It enables individuals to understand themselves as a changing subject and a subject in changing situations. For more on this topic, see J. Trzebiński (ed.), *Narracja jako sposób rozumienia świata*, Gdańskie Wydawnictwo Psychologiczne, Gdańsk 2002.

[371] She does not state exactly where she is going, but it can be inferred from her biography that she is leaving California to take a job at Yale University and live in New Haven, Connecticut. Cf. what I wrote in the chapter *Reconstruction of bell hooks' biography*.

her biographical work seems more analytical. It no longer refers to the content of her autobiographies, but to her texts as such. They are in themselves a manifestation of bell hooks's biographical work. They are her realization of the postulate to "speak with her own voice," that is, to give herself the status of a subject who speaks on her own behalf.

In summary, I would describe the stages of bell hooks's biographical work as follows:

1. The stage of generating and accumulating memories, which results in a moment of suspension of identity, the so-called floating: the feeling of being powerless; the fundamental question is: Who am I?
2. The stage of structuring accumulated memories and experiences: an attempt at self-understanding, reflecting on experiences and interpreting them. As a result, it becomes the stage of anchoring identity; the person has a sense of being at home and attempts to answer the question: Who am I?
3. The stage of restructuring experiences and reconstructing autobiography in the form of a record, a written story. At this stage, the person gives the story of their biography the characteristics of a closed composition, that is, one in which the elements of the presented world form a clear, logical and complete whole.
4. The stage of anchoring identity in one's own biography, which gives the person a sense of self-empowerment, evident in the feeling of control over their biography and the ability to "speak with one's own voice."

Biographical work involves reflecting on one's life in the form of a story about oneself. bell hooks undertakes to record her story in the form of an autobiography. Writing an autobiography forces one to do memory work—to collect memories about one's past. This is the first stage of biographical work. Recalled memories do not have a structured form. Giving them a coherent, logical shape is the conscious work of the author, and this constitutes the second stage of biographical work. This work, involving various thought processes, proceeds in an active way, as it does not only consist of recreating one's history in memory, but requires the subject to assign meanings

to their past experiences. It is therefore interpretive work within which identity work also takes place. It involves two main processes: floating and anchoring. The former relates in bell hooks's biography mostly to adolescence, which, according to Erik Erikson's stages of life, is the phase of experiencing identity conflict.[372] In her case, this conflict includes an attempt to work out for herself the answer to the question "Who am I?" as well as the need to be authentic and true to herself and her vision of life (becoming a poet). The author does not want to be like the members of her immediate family, especially her mother. Nor does she accept the life path pursued by them—she does not want to marry and be a wife and mother—so she experiences a sense of powerlessness and otherness.

In contrast, the second process, the anchoring of identity, is particularly evident during the author's early adulthood. During her college years, she becomes aware of the differences that separate her from other female students. When faced with the choice between different identity strategies, one of which is to assimilate with white middle-class students, she consciously opts for a vision of herself based on a traditional framework: ancestry and culture.

The goal of biographical work is transformation, which I identify in this study with self-empowerment. Self-empowerment is the development of the status of a subject who, by self-reflecting on their biography, reconstructs it and, with it, their concept of self. In the case of bell hooks, self-empowerment involves the realization of the postulates: "speaking with one's own voice" and "mapping one's own destiny," which ultimately takes the form of writing. bell hooks empowers herself by becoming a writer.

The stages presented are not closed structures, set in stone and final. The example of bell hooks's autobiography shows that biographical work resembles the hermeneutic circle. Its stages are subject to updating and reconstruction with each successive recall of memories and an attempt to incorporate them into the existing story about oneself. The process is developmental by its very nature. Development involves acquiring new knowledge about oneself and

[372] E. H. Erikson, *Childhood and Society*, Vintage Digital, London 2014.

incorporating it into one's existing self-concept, and is therefore a catalyst for change. Ultimately, it serves self-empowerment, helping to achieve not only a relatively stable sense of identity ("I know who I am"), but also a sense of agency and self-actualization ("I know what I can do").

Afterword: to read bell hooks

The story was written so that it could stand alone.[373]

Underlying the creation of this book was the need to reflect on the importance of autobiographical writing in the context of self-empowerment. I made bell hooks's autobiography the area of my research. I was interested in her story about herself because it contained a description of the author's transformation process: becoming bell hooks. This process takes place in the course of biographical work.

I assumed that the events described by bell hooks and the memories that she recalled constitute "autobiographical truth," which means that I did not question their authenticity, nor did I attempt to verify them in any way. The experiences recounted do not have to be factually true. Autobiography as a description of life is not necessarily synonymous with the reality of the life lived, but is a reflection on it. I therefore treated bell hooks's texts as a narrative reconstruction of her own life, written under specific circumstances and for a specific purpose.

The present book was also written under certain circumstances. Its author is a white woman from a post-communist country in Central Europe, an academic, who learned about feminism primarily from bell hooks's texts. While writing this book, I was aware that it was risky to build any analogies between the situation of a white woman in Poland, which is an ethnically and religiously homogeneous country, and that of a Black woman in American society, diverse in race, class, ethnicity and religion. The cultural and historical differences

[373] bell hooks, *Wounds of Passion…*, p. 260.

separating the United States and Poland are significant. On the one hand, there is the history of slavery, the experience of racism and discrimination manifested in the physical segregation of people. On the other, the communist regime, followed by neoliberalism, which reduced people to *homo oeconomicus* and *homo consumens* instead of giving them the awaited freedom. And yet, reading bell hooks's texts helps us to understand, for example, why, after the overthrow of communism in 1989, feminism in Poland could not become an "all-women's" movement. The political and economic transformation resulted in the deepening of social and economic inequalities, which led to the conclusion that women became the biggest losers of the change.[374] At the time, feminism in Poland had the face of educated middle-class women who were familiar with the legacy of feminism in Western European countries and the U.S. It was a metropolitan movement centered around academia and NGOs. So, it was not "feminism for everybody." Public discourse was dominated by the demand for gender equality in the area of politics and personal freedom. Therefore, the situation of Black women described by bell hooks, who have to work for economic reasons, take low-paying jobs and accept precarious employment, is not incomprehensible to women in Poland after 1989. Similarly, exclusion and marginalization due to low economic and cultural capital or social and ethnic background are something familiar. The experience of transformation has clearly shown that in addition to gender, women are also differentiated by class. Even more, also other components of identity and belonging besides gender are interconnected.

Now, a year after bell hooks's death in December 2021, I have reached again for *Talking Back…* and asked myself whether her texts can be read in relation to the situation of women in Poland, especially after the wave of demonstrations that started in October 2020.[375]

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[374] See, among others, J. Hardy, *Poland's New Capitalism*, Pluto Books, London 2009; I. Desperak, *Kobiety i praca. Wielkie przegrane polskiej transformacji*. Retrieved June 30, 2023, from http://www.ekologiasztuka.pl/pdf/fe0061desperak2004.pdf.

[375] On October 22, 2020, mass protests known as the Women's Strike began in Poland as a public reaction to the judgment of the Constitutional Court, which ruled that the possibility of abortion due to severe and irreversible fetal impairment

One can hear in these protests bell hooks's "talking back," that is, a loud cry for a space where women as political subjects can speak with their own voice. In the face of the attempt to introduce a total ban on abortion, women's strikes have become a breach, a narrow crack in the silence; they are fighting to legitimize their own voice for personal and political empowerment. In bell hooks's autobiography, such a space for speaking with her own voice was originally the community of her beloved black women; "a world of woman talk":[376]

> It was in this world of woman speech, loud talk, angry words, women with tongues quick and sharp, tender sweet tongues, touching our world with their words, that I made speech birthright—and the right to voice, to authorship, a privilege I would not be denied. It was in that world and because of it that I came to dream of writing, to write.[377]

bell hooks said that being part of the community of women was about being heard and recognized. If a general parallel can be drawn, I would say that women in Poland are striving precisely for that—to have their voices heard and recognized. Since they are disenfranchised, having a space where they can share their experiences is crucial for their empowerment.

The concrete experiences of women, both white and of color, provide a starting point on the road to individual and collective reclaiming of the past and the building of the future. bell hooks shows how speaking with one's own voice and reflection, which does not stop at the emotional content of experiences, but takes into account their historical, political and social dimensions, becomes an act of resistance;

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or an incurable disease threatening its life is unconstitutional. For more on this topic, see, among others, Z. Krzątała, *"You Will Never Walk Alone" – Polish Women* Strike Back*, Humanity in Action Poland, 2021. Retrieved June 30, 2023, from https://humanityinaction.org/knowledge_detail/you-will-never-walk-alone-polish-women-strike-back; J. Neumeyer, Poland's Abortion Ban Protests Changed the Country Forever, *Foreign Policy*, November 8, 2021. Retrieved June 30, 2023, from https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/11/08/poland-abortion-ban-women-strike-catholic-religion-progressive-politics/.

[376] bell hooks, *Talking Back…*, p. 5.

[377] Ibid., p. 6.

"a political gesture that challenges politics of domination that would render us nameless and voiceless. As such, it is a courageous act—as such, it represents a threat."[378]

[378] Ibid., p. 8.

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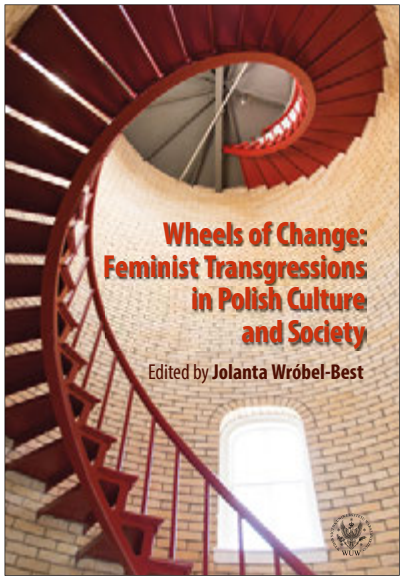
Index of names



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This book is the story of Gloria Jean Watkins (1952–2021), a Black woman from a small town in Kentucky who became bell hooks—a feminist icon, author, teacher and activist, one of the most significant and courageous voices of the contemporary debates on racial discrimination, feminism, and women's and minority rights. The leading topic in her writings was the process of empowerment. She addressed it in autobiographical essays, which constitute an important part of her work. Her critical and reflective essays were a space for her own emancipation and self-development as a feminist author and a Black woman. She made writing the meaning of her life. The proposed book focuses on this particular aspect of her work—it is a story about the "biographical work" of a woman who creates herself in the course of writing her autobiography.

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