

# Introduction: why bell hooks?

*They do not want to hear that the shared reality of femaleness does not mean an equal share in powerlessness.<sup>2</sup>*

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

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<sup>2</sup> 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,”<sup>3</sup> 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.<sup>4</sup> 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

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<sup>3</sup> bell hooks, *Talking Back. Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black*, South End Press, Boston 1989, p. 4.

<sup>4</sup> A. Ostaszewska, Kobięce 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\\_kwartalnikce\\_educ\\_pl\\_article\\_197](http://cejsh.icm.edu.pl/cejsh/element/bwmeta1.element.ojs-issn-1505-8808-year-2015-volume-18-issue-4_72_article-oai_ojs_kwartalnikce_educ_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.<sup>5</sup>

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.<sup>6</sup> Vikki Bell writes in this context about the feminist imagination.<sup>7</sup> 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.

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<sup>5</sup> I write more about my research approach and the role of feminist methodology in the chapter *The Research Approach*.

<sup>6</sup> R. Braidotti, *The Subject in Feminism*, *Hypatia*, 1991, 6(2), pp. 155–172.

<sup>7</sup> 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.<sup>8</sup> 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.<sup>9</sup> 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.<sup>10</sup> 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.”<sup>11</sup> 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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<sup>8</sup> See, among others, J. Butler, *Gender Trouble. Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Routledge, London–New York 1990.

<sup>9</sup> 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.

<sup>10</sup> 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.

<sup>11</sup> 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.*<sup>12</sup>

bell hooks (1952–2021) is the pseudonym of Gloria Jean Watkins (GJW<sup>13</sup>), 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,<sup>14</sup> 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.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>12</sup> bell hooks, *Wounds of Passion...*, p. 5.

<sup>13</sup> In the remainder of this book, I will use Gloria Jean Watkins's initials, GJW.

<sup>14</sup> 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.

<sup>15</sup> 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.

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## 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.<sup>16</sup> 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

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<sup>16</sup> 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,"<sup>17</sup> 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

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<sup>17</sup> bell hooks, *Wounds of Passion...*, p. x.

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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.<sup>18</sup> However, when characterizing the group and the author’s living environment, I also use the term “African American.”<sup>19</sup>

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

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<sup>18</sup> 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.

<sup>19</sup> 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.