

**THE DIALECTICS OF BELONGING IN BELL HOOKS' BONE BLACK:
MEMORIES OF GIRLHOOD**

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ABSTRACT. Bone Black represents bell hooks' lifestory of survival amidst a harsh racist and sexist environment in the South of the United States in the 1950s. Her childhood is clearly dominated by a feeling of estrangement and loneliness together with the pain of being the different one, the problematic child, the rebel. Out of the vignettes that compose her autobiography, those related to her maternal grandparents enclose the author's most cherished memories, steeped in the magic of storytelling, quilting and the life-giving communion with the earth and the natural elements. It is in the nurturing wisdom of the old and in the embracing welcome of books that hooks will eventually find what she was most yearning for, a way to belong.

1. INTRODUCTION.

In their struggle to speak in their own voices and make them heard, ethnic women writers have found in autobiography an apt means of storying their lives from their own personal perspective, as subjects, providing "an alternate version of reality seen from the point of view of the black female experience" (Braxton 1989: 201). In *Bone Black: Memories of Girlhood*, bell hooks writes about the world and her black community as perceived by a southern working-class black girl. hooks' childhood is a story of loneliness and misunderstanding, fear and incomprehension, but above all it is a story of a rebellious spirit coupled with an eternal yearning for belonging. Well-known for her outspoken insightful feminist books, bell hooks delves into the inner

darkness of her soul to search for her “way home”, a sense of belonging as a child, through the complex paths of memory that lead into the past. As she wrote in *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (1991: 40, 147), “memory need not be a passive reflection, a nostalgic longing for things to be as they once were; it can function as a way of knowing and learning from the past” and it “serves to illuminate and transform the present.” Throughout her autobiography, black southern folk and culture are portrayed and reclaimed as the foundations from which her selves stemmed. The power of words in storytelling, the intertwined histories in the quilting tradition and the home remedies all added to the magic of those childhood years that were “sometimes paradisaical and at others times terrifying” (hooks 1996: xi). Whether paradisaical or terrifying, those childhood memories must be rescued from the past and the danger of fading into oblivion, they must be turned into written traces of a bittersweet journey into adulthood and stand out as the reminder that “pain can be a constructive sign of growth” (hooks 1989: 103). Being non-conformist and speaking out can sometimes be very painful but, as bell hooks very well knows (1993: 25), “there is no healing in silence”.

Bone Black is presented as a set of memory sketches of things past and of things imagined and dreamed. It is an account not only of events but also, and most importantly, of the impressions they left on the author’s mind; as she states in the foreword (hooks 1996: xv): “[e]voking the mood and sensibility of moments, this is an autobiography of perceptions and ideas. The events described are always less significant than the impressions they leave on the mind and heart”. The controversial dialectics between fact and fiction in the autobiographic genre are thus resolved by hooks, who is also aware of the occasional uncertainty as to the truth and reality of some memories, something that makes her realise the extent to which each autobiography is just one of various possible versions of a life, the storying of events as the author remembers and invents them, rather than as they actually happened (hooks 1989: 157). Therefore, hooks (1996: xiv) acknowledges the important mythical and imaginative components in her autobiography, to the point of arguing that “[t]his is autobiography as truth and myth”. In this respect, she finds her text reminiscent of Audre Lorde’s *Zami* in her assertion that, while she was writing her lifestory,

I was compelled to face the fiction that is a part of all retelling, remembering. I began to think of the work I was doing as both fiction and autobiography. It seemed to fall in the category of writing that Audre Lorde, in her autobiographically-based work *Zami*, calls biomythography. As I wrote, I felt that I was not as concerned with accuracy of detail as I was with evoking in writing the state of mind, the spirit of a particular moment. (1989: 157-58)

2. ALIENATION AND THE PROCESS TOWARDS BELONGING.

Born in Kentucky in 1955, bell hooks lived her childhood years in the 60s, a time that was marked by the Civil Rights Movement and Black Arts Movement. However, the black woman was relegated to the household and the children, and black feminists like hooks herself (1989: 5) have repeatedly denounced the sexist nature of these movements, which cared for the interests of black males. All throughout her autobiography, there is a recurrent emphasis on alienation and the ensuing constant yearning for a feeling of belonging. hooks, the child, experiences an uncomfortable estrangement not only from her segregated school but also inside her own family at home. Gradually she finds out that the only place where she belongs is herself and the books she so eagerly reads, a delight that foreshadows her future as a writer, "creating the foundation of selfhood and identity that will ultimately lead to the fulfillment of her true destiny —becoming a writer" (hooks 1996: xi). Her loneliness and the rejection and criticism she encountered in her parents and siblings set the pace to the soothing welcoming refuge of literature, in spite of her parents' warning that reading so much would confine her to a world of madness: "I hear again and again that I am crazy, that I will end up in a mental institution. This is my punishment for wanting to finish reading before doing my work" (hooks 1996: 101).

The main problem hooks presents as a child, and above all, a female child, is her rebelliousness and her way of constantly talking back to adults. She observes the world and, not agreeing with or not understanding some of the things she sees, she is always ready to speak her mind and disobey the established or expected rules. But, as she would later write (1989: 16): "It is silly to think that one can challenge and also have approval". Therefore, she finds but alienation and loneliness, becoming a pariah: "They are glad to see her go, they feel as if something had died that they had long waited to be rid of but were not free to throw away. Like in church, they excommunicate her" (hooks 1996: 111). Part of the alienation the protagonist feels stems from the lack of understanding her mother shows. For her, hooks is the problematic one, the rebel who never obeys, the transgressor of the family. This is particularly seen during the time when her mother has to spend some time in hospital suffering from what seemed to be a serious ailment. While all the family members visit her, her disobedient daughter, once again, refuses to follow suit to her mother's despair. What she does not know then is that the true reason for her daughter's decision is one of love and sadness:

They say she is near death, that we must go and see her because it may be the last time. I will not go [...] I refuse to go. I cannot tell them why, that I do not want to have the last sight of her be there in the white

hospital bed, surrounded by strangers and the smell of death. She does not die. She comes home angry, not wanting to see the uncaring daughter, the one who would not even come to say good-bye [...] Upstairs in my hiding place I cry [...] She sends me orders to stop crying right this minute [...] that she should be crying, with my longing and my tears she knows that she breaks my heart a little. She thinks I break her heart a little. She cannot know the joy we feel that she is home, alive. (hooks 1996:144).

It is a mother alive and moving around the house, not dying, that the daughter wants to see and remember in her future memories. However, she is aware that even if she tried to explain herself, she would not be understood and her mother would not believe her inner happiness about having her back at home, alive. The undeniable emotional gap between mother and daughter highly contributes to hooks' alienation and enhances her yearning for belonging, but she is adamant about being a warrior and speaking her mind, despite familial confrontations.

hooks' love for her mother is fully expressed in another rebellious act after she has been beaten up by her husband. Living in a patriarchal society and community, hooks' mother falls prey to male domestic violence and power, something that does not escape her daughter's attention: "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" (hooks 1996: 151). This is what the daughter thinks on one occasion when, after trying to help her battered mother, she is once again reproached her disobedience and punished for her not understanding the established premise that she must grow up to be a good subservient wife and mother. This episode brings about hooks' negation of her mother:

She says that she punishes me for my own good. I do not know what it is I have done this time. I know that she is ready with her switches, that I am to stand still while she lashes out again and again. In my mind there is the memory of a woman sitting still while she is being hit, punished. In my mind I am remembering how much I want that woman to fight back. Before I can think clearly my hands reach out, grab the switches, are raised as if to hit her back [...] She is shocked [...] I tell her I do not have a mother. (hooks 1996: 152)

Finally the daughter stands still and suffers the psychological and the physical pain since she is sorry to have hurt her mother. This scene will mark their future relationship, as for hooks this is an unquestionable act of betrayal she cannot understand: "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" (hooks 1996: 152).

Apart from books, the distressed bell hooks also finds solace in Nature. In keeping with her closeness to the natural realm, she implicitly and unconsciously identifies with abandoned Christmas trees, "standing naked in the snow after the celebrations are over" (hooks 1996: 2), as naked and lonely as herself. In Nature she finds the understanding she is denied by her fellow humans and this communion not only with trees but also with the animal world is one of the childhood memories engraved in hooks' memory:

She liked to walk to a favorite tree up the hill and play with a bright green snake that lived there, a green tree snake. She knew how to talk to the snake and how to listen. She told the snake about the problems she was having learning her left from her right. The snake understood her frustration, her tears. (hooks 1996: 11)

In her book *Mythtypes: Signatures and Signs of African/Diaspora and Black Goddesses*, Alexis Brooks DeVita (2000: 51) argues that trees play a crucial role in the life of African-descent women who have lost their mothers. For them trees are spiritual mothers and signs of power "beyond death, and beyond social injustice, deprivation, or personal assault". We could go even further here and suggest that trees represent a symbol of empowerment and can actually be seen as spiritual mothers not only by motherless daughters, like Celie in *The Color Purple* (Brooks DeVita 2000: 50), but also by daughters who, having a mother, feel psychologically and spiritually bereaved, metaphorically motherless. hooks' autobiography is rich in nurturing images of natural elements; from her grandmother Saru, the storyteller, she learns about the vital ties with the earth and the things that come from it: "She needs to have her fingers in the soil, to touch dirt. She tells me this is part of her mother's legacy [...] From her mother she learned ways to make things grow" (hooks 1996: 52). And this is one of the legacies Saru tries to pass on to hooks: "She tells me that the best way to live in the world is to learn to make things grow" (hooks 1996: 60) since "[c]ommunion with life begins with the earth" (hooks 2000: 16).

Apart from the tradition of storytelling and the importance of the closeness to the earth, hooks learns from Saru about the black art of quilting. We are told that the old woman spends long hours making quilts from scraps of outgrown clothes from different family members. To such extent is quilting relevant for hooks that she introduces this recurrent image at the very beginning of her autobiography:

MAMA HAS GIVEN me a quilt from her hope chest. It is one her mother's mother made. It is a quilt of stars —each piece taken from faded-cotton summer dresses— each piece stitched by hand [...] Mama

tells us —her daughters— that the girls in her family started gathering things for their hope chest when they were very young [...] I am glad she shares the opening of the chest this time with all of us. I am clutching the gifts she hands to me, the quilt, the beaded purse. (1996: 1, 2)

Quilting has traditionally been seen as a way of creating bonds among African American women and, more specifically between mothers and daughters. The delight hooks finds in sharing the opening of the hope chest and witnessing her mother's tears from bittersweet memories is actually one of the best memories hooks has of her mother. But it is her mother's mother, Saru, the one hooks most identifies with quilting and all that it implies and one of the persons she learns more from. Her memories of Saru tell her that she was a real warrior, a fighter, a storyteller and interpreter of dreams. About Saru we read, "[w]hen she is not fighting she is quietly making quilts. Sewing the small pieces of fabric together eases her mind" (hooks 1996: 54). Quilting is passed on to hooks by her grandmother as an act of healing through which a woman learns patience (hooks 1996: 54) but also as a mode of storytelling, since each piece contains one or several stories: "Baba would show her quilts and tell their stories, giving the history [...] of chosen fabrics to individual lives [...] To her mind these quilts were maps charting the course of our lives. They were history as life lived" (hooks 1991: 120).

Like the small pieces that form a quilt, hooks' memories are arranged together in her autobiography. If quilts enclose bits and pieces of cherished histories from the past, hooks' book encloses treasured childhood memories in the literary hope chest of her self. Quilting gave black women the opportunity to tell their particular histories and stories, apart from the history imposed from outside by the white man. Likewise, hooks composes her autobiography from the memory traces of past events, both real and imagined, and also from hints of the past such as smells, colours and dreams. As Margot Anne Kelley (1994: 66) concludes when dealing with quilting and African American women novelists like Toni Morrison, Alice Walker or Gloria Naylor,

these literary women rely on partial, local, and fragmented knowledge to make a narrative. The writers acknowledge that both the quilts and the narratives —as well as the beings who are their makers— are constructed. However, they regard the need to piece and seam not as a reason for despair but as an opportunity to rework the outmoded, whether it be in clothing, novel structures or conceptions of the self.

Like novels —and quilts— autobiographies are also constructed versions of a life, where the author includes or leaves out certain parts, either intentionally or because her memory does not have access to them. But even those absent parts add meaning to the autobiography. After reading her

finished lifestory, hooks is surprised at her not having included more incidents involving her sisters but only her brother, something that, as she concludes (hooks 1989: 159), is a proof of her alienation from her sisters during childhood. This “sense of estrangement” was manifest and present in her autobiography through absence.

3. THE RE-BIRTH OF A RE-MEMBERED SELF.

As we have seen before, hooks' life is marked by the powerful presence of isolation, loneliness, rejection and misunderstanding, all of which had made her develop undesired bitter feelings towards her mother to the point of leading to utter rejection. Her love for her mother is clearly stifled by a strong feeling of resentment. However, by negating her mother, she is actually negating herself, that rebellious nature inside that does not let her belong and be completely loved by her mother and the rest of the family:

To me, telling the story of my growing up years was intimately connected with the longing to kill the self I was without really having to die. I wanted to kill that self in writing [...] 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. (hooks 1989: 155)¹

Taking control over her subjectivity and identity, hooks intends to rewrite herself or, as Audre Lorde (1984: 173) puts it, “to mother” herself, “claiming some power over who [she] choose[s] to be”. In keeping with the image of mothering is the recurrent metaphor of the cave. Apart from Saru, Daddy Gus, hooks' maternal grandfather, is a vital cornerstone in her lonely childhood. For her, he is the exception to the rule of patriarchal oppression which her own father so perfectly embodies: “I need his presence in my life to learn that all men are not terrible, are not to be feared” (hooks 1996: 85). Daddy Gus holds the key to the spiritual world and to inner knowledge. In hooks' memory he is associated with the realm of dreams and, most importantly, with the multilayered image of the cave, since “[h]is voice comes from some secret place of knowing, a hidden cave where the healers go to

1. Gloria Jean is bell hooks' original name. In *Talking Back* (1989: 160) she explains how she decided to take a pseudonym for her works, which was the name of her great-grandmother on her mother's side.

hear messages from the beloved” (hooks 1996: 86). She remembers him through a dream in which they both run away together holding hands; after getting rid of their clothes and being free of family ties and memory, they enter the darkness of a cave. Once there, they make a fire through which the old man can communicate with the spirits while the granddaughter bears witness silently, leaving the cave after the encounter. This symbolic passage encloses the rite of passage of the girl into the world of self-knowledge and self-creation out of the pain she is afflicted by. At this stage it is necessary to point out the various implications of the cave as metaphor. According to Mircea Eliade (1994: 58), caves are the settings of many initiation rites since they are symbols of the womb of Mother Earth, where the novice recovers the embryonic situation to be born again. As we have already seen, hooks’ estrangement from her mother encourages her to fill that gap with natural elements with which she feels identified, thus undergoing a symbolic return to Mother Earth. Notwithstanding these back-to-nature connections, the visit to the cave mainly suggests the search for inner knowledge, the return to the inside dark cave of the self to heal the wounds and be reborn. As a matter of fact, this new birth comes from the protagonist’s own womb of self-knowledge and her realisation that “inside all of us is a place for healing, [and] that we have only to discover it” (hooks 1996: 86). And this is what hooks discovers at the end of her childhood autobiography, the dark, bone black inner cave which is her home.

Black also plays a crucial role in hooks’ childhood and girlhood. Being forbidden by her mother to wear black clothes, just because “black is a woman’s color” (hooks 1996: 176), she hankers after this colour, which is a part of her ethnic identity. This is why she feels the comfort and reassurance of the darkness inside the dreamed cave, far from the colour prejudice in the adult world she does not understand. In the same way she does not comprehend adults’ worries about money, she does not understand why she has to play with a blond and white Barbie doll instead of a doll with her own skin colour. Barbie dolls seem fake to her, nothing like her, so she just destroys them. Despite her mother’s insistence that she and her sisters should play with those wonderful Barbies, she is adamant that she will only keep brown dolls:

She tells us that I, her problem child, decided out of nowhere that I did not want a white doll to play with, I demanded a brown doll, one that would look like me [...] I had begun to worry that all this loving care we gave to the pink and white flesh-colored dolls meant that somewhere left high on the shelves were boxes of unwanted, unloved brown dolls covered in dust. I thought that they would remain there forever, orphaned and alone, unless someone began to want them, to want to give them love and care, to want them more than anything. (hooks 1996: 24)

Far from celebrating her having light brown skin and almost straight hair, as adult women tell her she should do, hooks just finds her luck a cause of anger (hooks 1996: 9). So much is this the case that she ends up refusing to have her hair pressed like all the other black women, as in this ritual she perceives an act of ethnic betrayal which she will not abide by:

Secretly I had hoped that the hot comb would transform me, turn the thin good hair into thick nappy hair, the kind of hair I like and long for [...] Later, a senior in high school, I want to wear a natural, an Afro. I want never to get my hair pressed again. It is no longer a rite of passage, a chance to be intimate in the world of women. The intimacy masks betrayal. Together we change ourselves. The closeness is an embrace before parting, a gesture of farewell to love and one another. (hooks 1996: 93).

From hooks' identification with the colour black stems the very title of her girlhood autobiography. Once again, her learning about the definition of bone black is accompanied by symbolic associations pertaining to her female and ethnic identity. When at school she tries to paint the paintings she had seen inside the cave of her dreams, she thinks of black as the starting colour, in particular bone black, "a carbonaceous substance obtained by calcifying bones in closed vessels" (hooks 1996: 170). This definition she comes across in a book on the history of pigments triggers off connections with the sacred purifying fire in the cave: "Burning bones, that's what it makes me think about —flesh on fire, turning black, turning into ash" (hooks 1996: 170). Thus, in bone black are contained several traditional components of rites of passage, such as fire, ashes and the cave symbolized by the closed vessels.² Therefore, we can argue that bone black is hooks' own rebirth into maturation; by going inside her inner cave, by being burnt in the fire of redemption, she is reduced to ashes only to be reborn out of them like the Phoenix. She is reborn to a world of potentiality and power, a world where she belongs, leaving behind her anguished search for a spiritual home. Like Velma Henry in Toni Cade Bambara's *The Salt Eaters*,³ hooks overcomes her destructive desire to jump off

2. Apart from black, the colour red pervades hooks' account —and it is no mere coincidence that red is the dominant colour of the book cover. According to Robert Farris Thompson (1983: 6), "for many Yoruba, red [...] signals àshe and potentiality". It is interesting to note here the phonetic similarity between the terms "àshe" (spiritual power, energy to make things happen) and "ash".

3. When reflecting upon autobiographical writing, hooks (1989: 156) mentions this novel as an example of the hold the past can have on a person, hindering a complete healing in the present, as it happens with the protagonist of *The Salt Eaters*, Velma Henry. At the end of the novel, however, Velma is healed with the help of a female healer.

the cliff out of despair, loneliness and helplessness; instead she rescues herself: “I read poems. I write. That is my destiny. Standing on the edge of the cliff about to fall into the abyss, I remember who I am. I am a young poet, a writer. I am here to make words. I have the power to pull myself back from death—to keep myself alive” (hooks 1996: 182). The closing pages of the book include a final tribute to hooks’ beloved grandfather, Daddy Gus, who guided her in her particular journey. From him she learns that there are “lots of ways to belong in this world” and that she is supposed to find out where she belongs (hooks 1996: 183). The final catharsis creeps quietly, yet unrelentingly, in the night, like a snake. The power of darkness and the colour black embrace a recumbent body:

At night when everyone is silent and everything is still, I lie in the darkness of my windowless room, the place where they exile me from the community of their heart, and search the unmoving blackness to see if I can find my way home. I tell myself stories, write poems, record my dreams. In my journal I write—I belong in this place of words. This is my home. This dark, bone black inner cave where I am making a world for myself. (hooks 1996: 183)

Thus, as we have pointed out before, *Bone Black* is another example of the power of the word—written and oral—and the power of memory and imagination. It definitely proves to be what Jennifer Browdy De Hernandez terms “a writerly form of survival” (259),⁴ where, far from getting rid of the part of herself and of the past she rejects, bell hooks comes to terms with it and learns to put the broken pieces of her heart and her self back together again. All throughout the book we can perceive hooks’ internal battle between the self who wants to be absolutely her own free construction and the self who yearns for belonging within family and community, only to find out that they do not usually go hand in hand, not at least for a black woman and even less for a black female child. hooks herself (1989: 159) makes the point when reflecting on the act of autobiographical writing:

In the end I did not feel as if 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. In writing about her, I reclaimed that part of myself I had long ago

4. De Hernandez (1998: 259) employs this expression to refer to Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands* and Lorde’s *Zami*, who also use autobiography to create “a space in which to enact their transformative vision of the self as multiple, heterogeneous, and profoundly woman-oriented”.

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.

4. CONCLUSION.

As her grandmother used to do when making a quilt, by writing her childhood memories hooks rearranges pieces of her life into a liberating whole, coming to terms with the rejected self. In this respect, this autobiography responds to the "therapoetic" quality Kenyon and Randall (1997: 2) attribute to the telling of one's lifestory, since "storytelling (and storylistening) is not merely a method for solving particular problems that crop up in our lives, but has an importance and integrity all its own, as a means to personal wholeness".

Saru's prediction that her granddaughter is to be a warrior comes true, as she learns that you do not have to surrender to belong. While Daddy Gus tells her that there are many ways of belonging, her grandmother lets her know that "there are many battlegrounds in life" (hooks 1996: 51). Likewise, there may be different heterogeneous selves within a person which must be reconciled into wholeness. And the autobiography serves this conciliatory purpose for bell hooks, proving that in this genre "there is a 'pragmatics of representation' where truth is less the issue than 'the purpose an autobiographical statement serves in the life and circumstances of its author and readers'" (Gagnier 1991: 4, qtd. in Anderson 2001: 91). Audre Lorde (1984: 174, 146-47) makes the concluding point: "I have to learn to love myself before I can love you or accept your loving [...] Nothing I accept about myself can be used against me to diminish me. I am who I am, doing what I came to do".

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