

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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## **Bell hooks** (c. 1953- ) *Black Is a Woman's Color*

Ain't I A Woman (1981), bell hooks' first book, was a pioneering contribution to black feminism, and it launched her on a prominent career as teacher, author, and lecturer. But in it she said very little about herself, preferring, as she said later, to keep the narrative impersonal and not emphasize her own experiences. The name "bell hooks" (uncapitalized) was a pseudonym.

Since then, however, she was revealed more about herself and her reasons for writing. Her full name is Gloria Jean Watkins. She was born in rural Kentucky and attended segregated schools until her sophomore year of high school. She went to Stanford University, worked with other black women at the Berkeley Telephone Office in 1973-74, and then went to graduate school in English at the University of Wisconsin and the University of Southern California, finishing her work at the University of California, Santa Cruz. She has taught English, African American Studies at Oberlin, Yale, and the City College of New York.

Her later work has also become more autobiographical. As a means of over-coming the effects of oppression of black women, she has worked privately and with other women on what she calls "self-recovery," a significant term which simultaneously suggests personal history and personal therapy. A thoughtful reader can see how the chapter below is an example of such an effort. Here, too, however, she writes not only as "I," but also as "we" and "she" and one of the daughters—all ways of generalizing her experiences. These experiences convey much of cultural portent, beginning with her account of hair-straightening, which invites comparisons with the "conk" story in *The Autobiography of MLCOM* x.

In a short essay called "Writing Autobiography," she has also written about the experience of writing. "I began to think of the work I was doing as both fiction and autobiography," she says, like what "Audre Lorde, in her autobiographically based work *Zami*, calls bio-mythography."<sup>1</sup> Another revealing comment is that the telling of these stories bough "both a sense of reunion (with the past) and a sense of release." In another essay, "To Gloria, Who Is She: On Using a Pseudonym," she tells of choosing the name "bell hooks" both to honor a great-grandmother on her mother's side and because it evoked a "much that I am not" and had "a strong sound...of a strong woman."<sup>2</sup> We can therefore ask to what degree "Black is a Woman's Color" brings "release," and whether it is bell or Gloria.

The selection here is the excerpt from "Black Is a Woman's Color" published in *Callaloo* 12 (1989): 382-88.

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1. Bell hooks, *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black* (Boston: South End Press, 1989), pp. 157-58
2. Hooks, *Talking Back*, pp. 160-61