Black feminist writer, teacher, cultural critic, and renowned activist-scholar, bell hooks was born Gloria Jean Watkins in the small rural segregated Kentucky town of Hopkinsville on September 25, 1952. One of seven children (six female and one male) born to Rosa Bell and Veodis Watkins, hooks was raised in a poor working-class environment where her dad worked as a post office janitor while her mom worked in the home as a housewife. Her mother supported hooks’s love of poetry through encouragement. Life surrounding hooks’s experiences in this milieu is the lens she uses in much of her work exploring systems of oppression and domination. It is within this environment that she also learned the value of African American culture and community.

There were always books in the Watkins household where hooks developed her love of reading. She explained in her memoir, *Bone Black* of 1996, that during her childhood she would rather have read than gone outside to play. For her, books were treasures that showed her a new world, one in which she was less alone. And in the home of her grandmother Baba, and grandfather, Daddy Gus, she learned the value of storytelling and an appreciation for writing.

In 1973, hooks earned a bachelor’s degree at Stanford University, and in 1976, earned an master’s from University of Wisconsin, and a Ph.D. from the University of California, Santa Cruz in 1983. By the time she earned her Ph.D., hooks had published a chapbook of poetry, titled *And There We Wept*. For a second book, *Ain’t I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (1981), hooks used a historical framework and black feminist theory to challenge accepted ideas about black women’s experiences, particularly claims that black women were not victims of sexist oppression nor in need of an autonomous women’s movement.

As a young budding scholar experiencing self-doubt, hooks felt a need for anonymity, and thus adopted the name of her maternal great-grandmother, Bell Blair Hooks, who had taught her granddaughter that sisterhood empowers women by respecting, protecting, encouraging, and loving them. She has since written and published extensively on the intersection of race, gender, and class to demonstrate the many ways these systems of oppression and domination impact the lives of black women.

Inspired by the pedagogy of liberation espoused in the philosophy of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire, hooks wrote *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* of 1994. In it she links scholarly sources with personal experience to describe schooling in a segregated school system, illustrating how racial integration changed the quality of education for herself and other African Americans. She depicted classrooms under segregation as a place of ecstasy. African American students attended neighborhood schools where black teachers nurtured their learning, encouraged academic excellence, and promoted political action as an obligation and as a way of strengthening the black community.

Under the system of integration, however, it was mandated that black schoolchildren attend white schools, mostly via bussing. In this environment, hooks and fellow African American students were
treated as if they were inferior to whites, their intellectual development was ignored and they were subjected to textbooks and lectures that reinforced negative stereotypes about blacks and lacked any bona fide connection to their lived experiences. Nevertheless, hooks managed to complete grade school, acquire a college education, and eventually became a teacher. In this latter role, hooks wasted no time in promoting implementation of multicultural curriculum in all schools and encouraging teachers and students to challenge race, gender, and class discrimination to confront learned indifference toward African Americans and other people of color.

She went on to write *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* of 1984, in which she examines accomplishments and failures of the second wave of the feminist movement during the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. Offering an insightfully damning critique of theoretical claims among white middle-class feminists who marginalize women of color by presenting race as analogous to gender, hooks grounded her analysis in an historical context to demonstrate how such analogies conceal significant differences in women's experiences along lines of race and class, especially when it comes to the distribution of power in U.S. society. To rectify this situation, hooks urges feminists to work toward transforming structures of domination both in theory and in practice.


Throughout her career, hooks has had both part-time and full-time employment in academe, including stints at the University of Southern California, Los Angeles (1976–1979), San Francisco State University (early 1980s), Yale University (1985), Oberlin College (1988–1994), and City College of the City University of New York (1994–2004). Currently, hooks is on the faculty of Kentucky’s Berea College, where she has served as a Distinguished Professor-in-Residence since 2004.

She has lectured both nationally and internationally, as well as published a multitude of sources, including more than 30 books. In each of these endeavors hooks covers a lot of ground. First and foremost, hooks is a black woman whose scholarship is rooted in black feminist thinking/theory and politics, meaning that each and every theoretical analysis deals with social relations including personal experience, and is grounded in examining the various ways race, class, and gender, simultaneously intersect, connect to, and are impacted by interactions set in a particular historical context. Each and every analysis is aimed at promoting social and political change for the betterment of society.

Her work has brought hooks much acclaim. Enjoying international acclaim, however, does not mean that hooks has been operating without criticism. Referring to *Ain’t I a Woman*, renowned black feminist lesbian scholar and staunch activist Barbara Smith, for example, was one critic who came down hard on hooks. Among the myriads of criticism, Smith pointed to hooks’s glaring omission of black feminist organizing and the cultural and political circumstances surrounding the lives of black lesbians. Twenty-
five years later, hooks’s work no doubt remains controversial as debates over her theoretical analyses continue to spring up.

Forever raising critical questions, hooks has continued to contribute to feminist theory and academic pedagogy in the 21st century, publishing such books as *Feminism Is for Everybody: Passionate Politics* of 2000, which recounts the second wave of the feminist movement in the United States and invites men and women, young and not so young, operating outside the confines of academia, to consider opening themselves up to feminist politics, especially given the fact that such politics are renowned for bringing about social and political change. More recently, hooks wrote *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope* of 2003, which reexamines the institutionalized system of education in the United States. Expounding on the theoretical framework espoused in *Teaching to Transgress*, hooks encourages empowerment of students in the classroom and in the community, which leads to activism.

**See also**

Feminism

**Further Readings**


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