Violently Silenced? The Role of Violence in bell hooks’ Development as a Writer.

Claire Cooke
The University of Western Australia

In this article I argue that violent experiences were a crucial factor in bell hooks’ decision to write her first book Ain’t I A Woman?: Black Women and Feminism. Analysing the role of violence in hooks’ childhood in conjunction with the right to speech and silence forms the crux of my argument. I analyse hooks’ autobiographical works, Bone Black: Memories of Girlhood and Wounds of Passion: A Writing Life emphasising the role of paternal violence and how it contributed to her developing self-harming tendencies. Existing studies have already charted hooks’ development as a writer through her childhood memoir, Bone Black but have overlooked the role of violence, especially the self-harming tendencies. I consequently build on these existing studies by marrying violence, the right to speak, and silence to hooks’ development as a writer. In doing so, this article makes an original contribution to the existing critical literature on this feminist writer.

Introduction

bell hooks is a prominent Black feminist writer and author of the influential radical Black feminist text, Ain’t I A Woman?: Black Women and Feminism. The text was bold and provocative because, for the first time, Black women in North America were the focus of analysis and their unique situation traced by hooks from slavery through to the time of publication. Her text is a founding piece of Black feminist ideology that served as a catalyst for other Black women to write and theorise on gender, and as such, it needs significant critique. While her academic writing has been analysed, her autobiographical works not been subjected to the same rigorous inquiry, and I aim to change that. By considering both of her autobiographical texts in terms of silence and violence we can have a deeper understanding of why she wrote Ain’t I A Woman?. hooks constantly refers to life experiences – or context – throughout her copious writings and thus she embodies the significant relationship between lived experiences and writing strategies that is most evident in the autobiographical writings of Black feminists.

It is perhaps unsurprising that hooks uses the autobiographical genre to portray her childhood and growth as a writer, since she has articulated an understanding of autobiography as an instrumental method of mapping political journeys. hooks’ view complements Joanne Braxton’s argument that autobiography is a particularly apt way of

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2 My investigation of the crucial link between context (lived experiences) and writing is based on Linda Wagner-Martin’s argument in Linda Wagner-Martin, Telling Women’s Lives: the New Biography, New Brunswick, Rutgers University Press, 1994, p. 4.
3 bell hooks, Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics, Boston, South End Press, 1990, p.79.
telling and claiming ownership of one’s life, because it enables the author to tell their version of events through an uninterrupted means. ¹ Specifically, Braxton highlights that ‘the writing of autobiography is a conscious assertion of identity, as well as the presentation of an alternative version of reality’.² This understanding of autobiography is encapsulated in hooks’ rupturing of her childhood identity and recording her experiences through the autobiographical works. hooks’ work therefore continues the established literary tradition of Black female writers using autobiography as a deliberate expression of their identity. Despite their unconventional narrative structure, hooks’ Bone Black: Memories of Girlhood and Wounds of Passion: A Writing Life fit into this established literary tradition. The autobiographical structure enables hooks to claim her childhood memories. Significantly, the autobiographical works enable me to contextualise hooks’ decision to write Ain’t I A Woman in terms of how she perceived and determined pivotal events in her childhood.

I consider these crucial childhood events using the ‘multiple oppression paradigm’ which forms the basis for my key questions. Within Black feminism, ‘the multiple oppression paradigm’ defines Black women as simultaneously suffering from race, gender and class oppression.³ In this article I aim to demonstrate that physical and emotional violence also infiltrated the multilayered contextualisation hooks constructs throughout her autobiographical works. I thus add a fourth paradigm to the contextualisation of race, gender and class divisions by considering the role of violence in the identity formation of Black women.⁴ These four elements form the basis for the key questions posed in this article: namely, what forms of violence did hooks experience during her childhood? How did these forms of violence intersect with hooks’ ongoing experiences of silence? How did violence and silence shape hooks’ development as a writer and resulted in her writing the highly significant text Ain’t I A Woman?

In order to address these key questions, I analyse two of hooks’ autobiographical works, Bone Black and Wounds of Passion. Using these works, I chart the pivotal events of her childhood, adolescence and university studies to reveal how she was subjected to multiple forms of oppression, emphasising the role of violence in the formation of her identity and how this fed into her decision to write a radical feminist text. By focusing on both Bone Black and Wounds of Passion, this analysis expands on existing research about hooks by Maria Del Davidson, George Yancy and Susana Vega-Gonzalez who have focused exclusively on Bone Black. This article subsequently makes a novel contribution to existing research on hooks by studying how she has used autobiography and the impact of violence to her identity.

Violence is constructed in hooks’ writings to function in two crucial ways. The first construction takes the form of paternal violence in the portrayal of her father as a

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¹Braxton, Black Women Writing Autobiography, p.201.
²Braxton, Black Women Writing Autobiography, p.201.
violent patriarch functioning to reinforce gender norms.\textsuperscript{8} The second form of violence involves self-harming tendencies. These self-harming discourses have not been accounted for in existing studies, and this silence contributes to a wider academic denial of the efficacy of silence in the formation of identity. In analysing these autobiographical works, I illustrate how periods of enforced silence manifested into the emotional violence of self-harm. The role of multiple violences in hooks’ life is evident from her early transgression of gender roles for which she was punished through the use paternal violence. The resulting attempts to violently force her into submission were combined with her being denied the right to speak and forcibly silenced through repeated periods of prolonged isolation. By bringing these two forms of violence to the forefront of my analysis I show how multiple forms of oppression from hooks’ childhood combined to ultimately influence her decision to write Ain’t I A Woman?. In order to do this, the article begins by examining the significance of hooks adopting a penname and then deconstructing the primary sources, before critically analysing the role of violence in hooks’ childhood.

(Re)Writing Identity

Born as Gloria Jean Watkins, on September 25, 1952, hooks developed her penname when she first began to publish poetry in order to assert her autonomy from another woman in her home community of the same name.\textsuperscript{9} Davidson and Yancy argue that hooks’ adoption of a penname exemplifies her continued refusal to be silenced, because adopting a penname served to transgress the role of passive observer to one of active subject.\textsuperscript{10} hooks’ pen name subsequently allowed her to claim an identity that served as an active process for breaking through the imposed forms of isolation which reverberated throughout her childhood.\textsuperscript{11}

hooks has published two autobiographical works which typify her attempts to reclaim the voice she was repeatedly denied during childhood. Both Bone Black and Wounds of Passion describe numerous childhood experiences of violence. Despite this overlap, however, each book has its own specific agenda. For instance, Bone Black was first published in 1996 and ‘draws together the experiences, dreams, and fantasies that most preoccupied her as a girl’.\textsuperscript{12} The memoir simultaneously seeks to preserve and destroy the past, facilitating a psychological catharsis for hooks.\textsuperscript{13} The catharsis is constructed through the symbolic and retrospective recollection of her defining childhood experiences.\textsuperscript{14} Within this recollection hooks appears as a rebellious young

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item[12]Bone Black was first published in the United States of America by Henry Hold and Company in 1996. hooks, Bone Black, pp.x,185.
\item[14]Estelle Jelinek argues that it is reasonable conjecture to link the disjunctive style of women’s autobiography to the fragmentation of their lives in The Tradition of Women’s Autobiography: From Antiquity to the Present, Twayne Publishers, Boston, 1986, p.xiii. Also see, for instance, Joanne M.
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girl who refuses to conform despite the life-threatening consequences during a childhood dominated by feelings of estrangement and loneliness.\textsuperscript{15} Vega-Gonzalez suggests that the overarching theme is a yearning to belong. While I acknowledge that feelings of isolation dominate Bone Black, it has become clear to me that violence is another major theme that has been repeatedly overlooked by academics. Violence more over, as I will show by also analysing Wounds of Passions, is strongly linked to hooks’ feelings of estrangement.

Wounds of Passion, first published in 1997, serves as the second primary source for this article.\textsuperscript{16} Similar to Bone Black, hooks does not chronologically map her journey, but instead she selects memories that signified her development as a writer.\textsuperscript{17} Described by hooks as a critically reflective look at the experiences that most shaped her as a writer, Wounds of Passion is a ‘book of ruminations on the early years of her writing life’.\textsuperscript{18} She constructs the memoir to chart the development of her political consciousness, and the timeline consequently spans from her undergraduate years at Stanford University through to her postgraduate studies.\textsuperscript{19} This autobiographical work is closely tied to Bone Black because it ‘links childhood obsessions with writing and the body to the early years of young adulthood wherein ... [she] ... strived to establish a writing voice and create sustained work’.\textsuperscript{20}

hooks attributes her non-linear memoir construction to Audre Lorde’s Zami: A New Spelling of My Name.\textsuperscript{21} In Zami, Lorde combined fiction and autobiography to create bio-mythography.\textsuperscript{22} Lorde’s work strongly influenced hooks’ formulation of ‘lyrical poetic prose style’ in an attempt to navigate her working-class and fundamentalist Christian childhood.\textsuperscript{23} hooks’ construction of these texts does not utilise specific dates, making it difficult to precisely chart the relevant dates and times of significant events in her life. hooks’ autobiographical writing style, however, means that the major events of her childhood are mentioned in her other texts including Talking Back: Thinking Black, Thinking Feminist and Remembered Rapture: The Writer at Work.\textsuperscript{24} When these texts are read in conjunction with her autobiographical works, these childhood events are reaffirmed as pivotal, which allows me to analyse them in terms of the significant oppression paradigms in her life.

Violently Silenced

hooks’ childhood was continually marred by patriarchal violence. Growing up in an all Black, Southern community in a working class family, her father disciplined with brute force.\textsuperscript{25} There are three childhood experiences of paternal violence that exemplify the

\textsuperscript{13} Vega-Gonzalez, ‘The Dialectics of Belonging’, pp.237, 240.
\textsuperscript{15} hooks, Wounds of Passion, p.xxii; Nichols, ‘Review’, p.17.
\textsuperscript{16} hooks, Wounds of Passion, p.xvi; Also see, for instance, Nichols, ‘Review’, p.17.
\textsuperscript{17} Nichols, ‘Review’, p.17.
\textsuperscript{18} hooks, Wounds of Passion, p.xxii.
\textsuperscript{21} hooks, Wounds of Passion, pp. 221–222; hooks, Talking Back, p.76; hooks, Remembered Rapture, p.89; hooks, Bone Black, p.vii.
continual pressure hooks was subjected to and later shaped her development as a writer; these are the red wagon incident, the marble game and her mother’s eviction from the family home, all of which significantly impacted on her childhood. These events are interwoven with frequent physical punishments by her father for failing to conform to the gendered expectations of her family, which later resulted in severe emotional violence through self-harming tendencies.

hooks, the youngest of six siblings (five sisters and one brother), often played with her brother, unaware of the potentially gendered implications such play held. It was during such play that the first of these significant events occurred when her brother preferred to be pulled around by her in a red toy wagon, rather than pushing her. His preference signalled a symbolic emasculation and destabilised the gendered power relations. As hooks recalls, for instance, that she ‘was to ride in it because she was a girl ... [and he] ... was to pull it because he was a boy’. hooks pulling her brother around meant he symbolically assumed the powerless feminine role despite concurrent assertion of power in convincing hooks to transgress the gendered boundaries for his personal gain. When her father and great-grandfather discovered the gendered role reversal hooks notes that ‘... [t]hey would stand towering over him speaking in harsh big voices explaining that he was the boy and should do this’. The incident highlights how the patriarchs of the Watkins family strictly enforced the traditional, normalised gender roles, ultimately resulting in hooks suffering because once her brother had been chastised, he would wait until they were alone to tell her ‘that he hate, hate, hated her because she was a girl’. She was consequently placed in a precarious state as she was positioned between attempting to please her brother, which ended in hatred, or force him to push her around, resulting in his resentment. In either circumstance, hooks was inevitably to suffer some form of punishment.

The ‘red wagon incident’ was not the only one for which hooks was punished for transgressing the prescribed gender roles during her childhood after the ‘red wagon incident’. One weekend while her father watched television, her brother was playing with his marbles in the same room. Demanding to be included in the game, she was frustrated and annoyed when her brother denied her the opportunity to play with the marbles, since she had none. She was only permitted an old family quilt, beaded purse and later second-hand books from her parents. None of these items encouraged or facilitated physical activity like the marbles her brother was permitted. Deprived of her own marbles and the opportunity to play with her brother, she became understandably irritated. The situation became dire when, according to her version of events, she finally caved to her brother’s dare walked and through his marble collection strewn across the floor. In giving into this challenge, hooks again transgressed the prescribed gender roles by storming through the masculinised space. Unfortunately her father had witnessed the destruction of the marble game and was enraged that she had dared to penetrate the masculine space resulting in him attempting to physically beat her into submission. This was compacted by his repeated reprimands: ‘... [d]idn’t I tell you to leave those

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28 hooks, Bone Black, p.19.
29 hooks, Bone Black, pp.20–21.
30 hooks, Bone Black, p.21.
31 hooks, Bone Black, p.20.
32 hooks, Bone Black, p.29.
33 hooks, Bone Black, pp.1, 76–78.
34 hooks, Bone Black, pp.29–30.
marbles alone? Didn’t I tell you?’ as hooks’ mother passively and helplessly watched on.35

Importantly, this version of events differs from hooks’ later recollection of the same marble incident. In The Will to Change: Men, Masculinity, and Love, published in 2004, eight years after Bone Black, the overarching message that hooks had to submit to the patriarchal rule of her father remains unchanged.36 However, she states in her ‘Understanding Patriarchy’ chapter that ‘one evening my brother was given permission by Dad to bring out the tin of marbles’ because her father had decided that her brother was no longer allowed to play marbles with hooks, and both children needed to learn a lesson about appropriate gender roles.37 The motives differ as she shifts the fault of her transgression to her father, implying he deliberately staged the event.38 Her father is again described as intervening and beating her.39 This time, however, she claims that the violent outburst continued whilst the rest of the family watched on ‘rapt before the pornography of patriarchal violence’.40 The terminology used to describe the beating, such as ‘pornography’, articulates the seriousness and sexuality that is absent in hooks’ childhood memoir, as it is now her entire family, not simply her mother, who were silent witnesses.41 It is crucial that the minor differences in the version of events and the language used in both stories maintain hooks’ father as actively and violently policing the gender roles within the home, as it continues to construct him as the tyrant of the house. His disciplinary actions typify the qualities traditionally associated with the construction of masculinity, and the passivity of hooks’ mother (or family depending on the version of events) watching the beating, intentionally or otherwise, served to sanction the harsh treatment hooks received. Her mother’s silence left hooks vulnerable, unprotected and completely exposed to her father’s rage. The description of the enraged beating prefaces her parent’s decision to ‘break’ her.42

My analysis of the marble incident concurs in some respects with Vega-Gonzalez, who reads the incident solely from Bone Black as hooks failing to comprehend the established premise that she must grow up to become a good subservient wife and mother.43 The violent patriarchal policing hooks was subject to is perceived as for her own good because a good subservient wife and mother is granted patriarchal ‘security’ through marriage which affords her the protection of a husband and the privilege of heterosexuality. However, I believe the incident can be read as more than hooks failing to understand what she must become, and instead is significantly revealing about the relationship between her and her mother. The maternal relationship was marred by the daughter’s refusal to be silenced and her mother’s refusal to defy her husband, despite the consequences for hooks. During the marble incident in both cases, her mother watched the violent beating and did not intervene. This was again reflected in the miscommunication between daughter and mother when they were forcibly evicted from the family home one night.

The violent and gendered dynamics in hooks’ relationship with her parents became apparent once again when her mother was temporarily but ferociously evicted

35 hooks, Bone Black, p.30.  
37 hooks, The Will to Change, p.20.  
38 hooks, The Will to Change, p.20.  
39 hooks, The Will to Change, p.20.  
40 hooks, The Will to Change, p.21.  
41 hooks, Bone Black, p.30.  
43 Vega-Gonzalez reads this as hooks ‘not understanding the established premise that she must grow up to be a good subservient wife and mother’. Vega-Gonzalez, ‘The Dialectics of Belonging’, p.240.
from the family home.\textsuperscript{44} It is another incident which highlights how paternal violence and silence correlated in the household to further isolate hooks from her family. According to hooks, her father began to accuse her mother ‘and she came running into the house with him close behind yelling and hitting ... [because] ... he was confronting her about sleeping with another man’.\textsuperscript{45} Her mother denied the allegations; her father fiercely beat her mother and threatened to kill her because ‘he wasn’t going to have it—she was gonna have to leave his house before he killed her’.\textsuperscript{46} The use of violence served to physically reassert his threatened masculinity and temporarily destabilised rule over the household. This has been interpreted as a display of masculine power.\textsuperscript{47} I support this observation because it follows the continuing pattern of her father using violence to reassert his patriarchal authority over the other members of the household. The traumatic, violently charged event connected the mother and daughter; as hooks notes ‘that night it was as though she and mama were one’.\textsuperscript{48} She was driven by loyalty to her mother ‘to be her witness, to stand by her side, and if necessary die for her’ in a display of female solidarity.\textsuperscript{49} She even recalls that she ‘knew that there was only one life in that room that ... [she] ... felt like saving ... the life of ... [her] ... mother’.\textsuperscript{50} Her father insisted both women leave the house immediately and the banished pair consequently retreated to her mother’s childhood home.\textsuperscript{51} The forced removal proved temporary, as hooks’ mother ultimately decided to return home, filling hooks with torment and rupturing the temporary sense of solidarity which had been established between the mother and daughter.\textsuperscript{52} The return to the family home and the potential for violence within it thus once again rendered hooks isolated within it.\textsuperscript{53}

**Breaking Down hooks**

The use of paternal violence clearly had strong repercussions for hooks as the eviction from the family home demonstrates. What remains unaddressed in previous studies is how the ramifications of paternal violence transpired into self-harming tendencies.

My close reading of *Bone Black* suggests that hooks continued to be involuntary isolated and alienated throughout her childhood and adolescence.\textsuperscript{54} These periods of isolation, according to hooks’ recollection, began with her father declaring that she ‘had too much will for a girl, that ... [she] ... would not make anybody a good wife’.\textsuperscript{55} By having ‘too much will for a girl’, she failed to conform to the prescribed and accepted feminine levels of passivity. She does not remember the exact age ‘they decided it was important to break ... [her] ... the way horses are broken’, only that she ‘did not want to be broken’.\textsuperscript{56} In this case, ‘they’ implicitly refers to hooks’ parents because of the way the periods of isolation were executed. The overarching reason for this repeated isolation

\textsuperscript{44}hooks, *Wounds of Passion*, pp.9, 11, 176–177.
\textsuperscript{45}hooks, *Wounds of Passion*, p.9.
\textsuperscript{47}Vega-Gonzalez, ‘The Dialectics of Belonging’, p.240.
\textsuperscript{48}Original emphasis removed. hooks, *Wounds of Passion*, p.9; hooks, *Bone Black*, p.139.
\textsuperscript{50}hooks, *Wounds of Passion*, p.11.
\textsuperscript{51}hooks, *Wounds of Passion*, pp.10–11.
\textsuperscript{55}hooks, *Wounds of Passion*, p.18.
\textsuperscript{56}hooks, *Wounds of Passion*, p.18.
was because she wanted ‘to express herself—to speak her mind’, and this desire resulted in her being banished to her windowless bedroom.\(^57\) This bold desire for self-expression was a blatant transgression of the established power relations: her daring to speak shifted her from the role of the object, who passively observed, to the subject.\(^58\) This transgression served to disrupt the parallel between hooks and her mother. During the marble game, for instance, hooks’ mother passively observed the brutal beating hooks was subjected to for interrupting her brother’s masculinised space. In direct opposition to her mother’s behaviour hooks refused to adopt a passive role by expressing herself through speech. As I have previously established in this article, hooks’ family was firmly governed by a patriarch who demanded absolute authority and obedience, requiring her mother and siblings to submit his rule. hooks’ desire to express herself transgressed the patriarchal organisation of the household and threatened to reverse the power relations policed by her father.

hooks presents the silencing tactics deployed against her as culminating in self-harming tendencies and suicidal thoughts from the age of thirteen, which were employed as a way of reasserting her limited power within the family home.\(^59\) According to her autobiography Bone Black, the pivotal incident occurred during her adolescence one weekday afternoon after she returned home from school and began ironing, which was one of her regular chores.\(^60\) This particular afternoon she was subjected to taunts from her mother and sisters when it was her turn to iron. She notes that even before she started ironing she was ‘being yelled at’.\(^61\) Her mother and sisters, she recalls, were telling her over and over again that she was crazy and would end up in a mental institution.\(^62\) The tormenting was her punishment for wanting to finish reading before commencing her chores.\(^63\) As the torments continued, she, out of desperation, placed the hot iron on her arm until the flesh burnt.\(^64\) Her family reacted by merely laughing and yelling that no one would visit her in the mental hospital.\(^65\) Her mother unsympathetically forced her to finish ironing the clothes in her basket despite the violent act of self-harm.\(^66\) It is clear from the recollections that she perceived her family as unsympathetic because they refused to cease their taunting. The self-harming demonstrates that hooks was attempting to assert control in an emotionally violent situation where she felt stifled and powerless.

**Studied Isolation**

Isolation continued to permeate throughout hooks’ education. She grew up in the segregated South, attending all Black public schools for the majority of her secondary education, which fostered a sense of belonging and positive affirmation.\(^67\) Being

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\(^{57}\) hooks, Bone Black, pp.130, 183; hooks, Wounds of Passion, p.18.
\(^{58}\) Davidson and Yancy, ‘Introduction’, p.3.
\(^{59}\) hooks, Wounds of Passion, pp. 34,142; hooks, The Will to Change, p.xv.
\(^{60}\) hooks, Bone Black, p.101.
\(^{61}\) hooks, Bone Black, p.101.
\(^{62}\) hooks, Bone Black, p.101.
\(^{63}\) hooks, Bone Black, pp.101–102.
\(^{64}\) hooks, Bone Black, p.102; hooks, Talking Back, p.155.
\(^{65}\) hooks, Bone Black, p.102.
\(^{66}\) hooks, Bone Black, p.102.
educated in segregated schools, hooks argues, meant she ‘had wonderful Black women teachers’ as role models.\textsuperscript{68} The transition from all-Black public schools to segregated schools, she pinpoints, was the beginning of an awakening to the dilemma of racism and white supremacy because abruptly, at the age of sixteen, going to school required the escort of the National Guard, again emphasising the threat of physical violence she faced.\textsuperscript{69} Suddenly, hooks was thrust into a desegregated environment and recalls that she no longer felt that she belonged at school. Requiring the escort of the National Guard was a consciousness-raising moment for hooks. She now understood that white supremacy was a political ideology which governed the social mores of her life, and for many white people, was stronger than any injunction of the state. This sense of isolation and recognition of white supremacy was increasingly heightened during her university studies.\textsuperscript{70}

As with her entry into a desegregated school, racism was present for hooks from the outset of her university studies. Initially, hooks began her undergraduate degree at a predominantly white all-girls college within driving distance of her home, on a full academic scholarship.\textsuperscript{71} She had significant trouble fitting in owing primarily to race differences at the college, and as a result of these difficulties, hooks was encouraged to apply to Stanford University, \textit{Palo Alto}.\textsuperscript{72} As such by the time she commenced at Stanford University with a scholarship to continue her undergraduate studies, she familiar with the politics of race. Race and fear had been closely linked during hooks’ childhood as

\begin{quote}
\textit{she had learned to fear white folks without understanding what it is she fears ... [because] ... the world is more a home for white folks than it is for anyone else, that Black people who most resemble white folks will live better in that world.} \textsuperscript{73}
\end{quote}

The politics of racism were stark despite hooks growing up in an all Black community, as she feared ‘without understanding’ racism as an ideology.\textsuperscript{74} Thus, when hooks began studying in California, she noted that ‘everyone in California acted as if race did not matter’ and hooks felt as if she was ‘always looking past the fiction of racial manners and seeing the nightmare of race lurking in the shadows’.\textsuperscript{75} This remark suggests that racial differences were tolerated, although racism ebbed uneasily underneath the veneer of polite etiquette. The situation is concisely captured in hooks’ remark that ‘[t]o them she was invisible, a country girl from the south, with old-fashioned religion and a feudal sense of honor, things that had no place in their world’.\textsuperscript{76} The remark reveals that hooks felt racially and socially isolated during her undergraduate years at Stanford. hooks’ also felt invisible at university due to class. At Stanford, she recalls, everyone made fun of the South especially Kentucky, her home state. The mocking both angered and bored her because she was convinced they really knew nothing about Kentucky.\textsuperscript{77} It was this mocking at Stanford that caused her to seriously begin contemplating class differences because ‘[t]o be materially underprivileged at a

\textsuperscript{68} hooks, \textit{Talking Back}, p.56.
\textsuperscript{69} hooks, ‘Critical Consciousness for Politic Resistance’, p 41; Dieckmann, ‘bell hooks’, p.125.
\textsuperscript{70} hooks, ‘Critical Consciousness for Politic Resistance’, p.42.
\textsuperscript{71} bell hooks, \textit{Where We Stand: Class Matters}, New York, Routledge, 2000, p.25.
\textsuperscript{72} The recommendation was from one of her English professors who had attended there. hooks, \textit{Where We Stand}, p.28.
\textsuperscript{73} hooks, \textit{Bone Black}, p.31.
\textsuperscript{74} hooks, \textit{Bone Black}, p.31.
\textsuperscript{75} hooks, \textit{Wounds of Passion}, p.50.
\textsuperscript{76} hooks, \textit{Wounds of Passion}, p.50.
\textsuperscript{77} hooks, \textit{Wounds of Passion}, p.60.
university where most folks (with the exception of workers) are materially privileged provokes such thought’.\(^7\) For instance, hooks was unable to afford the journey home during the first few holiday breaks at Stanford, so she would stay with the working class ‘Black women who labored as maids, as secretaries’ who she had befriended in order to overcome her feelings of isolation during the semester.\(^7\)

Her isolation operated on two levels, relating to both race and class. She would leave her undergraduate women’s studies classes ‘into a void … still invisible, … history unknown, … reality denied’ while working in order to save money to send home, emphasising the class realities that separated her from fellow students.\(^\)\(^8\) The isolation and employment history both signalled a catalyst for her first book, \textit{Ain’t I A Woman?}, which she began writing at nineteen.\(^9\)

\textbf{Writing Women}

The publication of \textit{Ain’t I A Woman?} marks the beginning of hooks’ writing career and embodies her poetic and writing influences in conjunction with her continual experiences of violence, racism, sexism and class isolation. I expose these links by outlining how hooks encompassed writing into her identity during her university studies, explaining how isolation served as a catalyst and briefly outlining the wider implications of hooks publishing \textit{Ain’t I Woman?}. This expose shows that violence was a catalyst for hooks’ development as a writer because the paternal and emotional violence she relays in \textit{Bone Black} and \textit{Wounds of Passion} directly contributed to her feelings of estrangement, feelings which dominated her childhood and teenage years, continuing throughout her university studies and culminating in the decision to write \textit{Ain’t I A Woman?}. hooks’ experiences of seclusion and marginalisation at university resulted in her shifting her identity and deciding to write on Black feminism. She, for example, ‘arrived at college confident that she was a poet. She was not searching for an identity. She was not even searching for love. She knew she was a poet’.\(^10\) However, her direction shifted after attending classes such as women’s studies when she discovered that she was alone in her analysis of race and gender being intersecting forms of oppression.\(^11\) Consequently, hooks returned home to her Black partner at the time, Mack, and announced that she could not ‘return to class anymore. It’s too much … too much on the outside’ and she would write a book instead.\(^12\) Her announcement stemmed from the feeling of being the ‘other’ in her classes, reflecting how she felt constantly excluded, invisible and marginalised at university. I argue that the status of ‘outsider within’ allowed this writer to further cultivate an understanding of how race, gender and class formed an intersecting pattern of oppression rendering hooks invisible and silent in her academic classes because of the overwhelming white hegemony.\(^13\) This echoes the

\(^{7}\)hooks, \textit{Talking Back}, p.75.

\(^{8}\)hooks, \textit{Talking Back}, p.100.


\(^{13}\)hooks, \textit{Wounds of Passion}, p.99.

themes emerging from her early childhood recollections, namely the repeated periods of physical violence, feelings of emotional isolation, continually being silenced and the ever present desire to speak her mind. These tendencies remained ever present despite the paternal and emotional violence hooks suffered. The continual experiences of alienation at university severely limited her sense of belonging because of her ‘outsider within’ status. By writing a book, she had the rare opportunity to place Black women at the centre of the text rather than the margins where, according to Braxton, Black women have frequently been located in critical discourse. For hooks, the margins form a site of resistance, relative equality and a space of transformation never entirely removed from the axis of exploitation and domination. By seeing the margins as a positive site of resistance, hooks was able to utilise her status as ‘outsider within’ and make an important contribution to Black feminist theory. For example, the day hooks declared her decision to defer her studies, she stated, that her book would ‘… [n]aturally … look at Black women and feminism’ because she had grown ‘weary of white women suggesting Black women have always been free’. This continual sense of marginalisation is reflected in her bitter disappointment that the libraries had so few books about Black women. The resulting Ain’t I A Woman? was written in response to the racism and invisibility she experienced during her undergraduate studies at Stanford.

South End Press published Ain’t I A Woman? eight years later. Significantly, South End Press is a not-for-profit, collectively organised book publisher which aims to publish works ‘to meet the needs of readers who are exploring, or are already committed to, the politics of radical social change’. The nature of South End Press subsequently categorises Ain’t I A Woman? as a radical Black feminist text. Consequently, hooks’ attempts to ‘discuss the relevance of feminism to Black people’, particularly in regard to ‘the impact of sexist discrimination and sexist oppression on the lives of Black women’, was defined as a radical project by South End Press. The radical


hooks, Feminism is for Everybody, p.125.

element of the project stemmed, according to Beverly Guy-Sheftall, from her focus on how patriarchy and racism affected Black men and served to defeminise female slaves.95 The radical project was driven by personal experiences of isolation and a desire to counter the continual silence she encountered, both of which stemmed from hooks’ experiences regarding race, class, gender and significantly, violence.96

Conclusion

I have illustrated that the right to speech and methods of silencing are crucially interlinked with the physical and emotional violence that hooks experienced during her childhood. Using three childhood experiences I showed the continual pressure that hooks was subjected to as a child. The red wagon incident, marble game and her mother’s eviction from the family home were all marred by paternal violence. Throughout hooks’ childhood I have shown that she was frequently physically punished by her father for failing to conform to the required role of feminine passivity that was expected of her. This defiance, I maintain, led to her being silenced and emotionally distanced from her family. Her refusal to be silenced manifested into self-harming tendencies and suicidal thoughts during her teenage years. Silencing continued throughout her university studies principally through race, class and gender discrimination. The ever present multiple forms of oppression, when combined with the paternal and emotional violence evident in Bone Black and Wounds of Passion, reveal that the motivations for writing the radical Ain’t I A Woman? were present from childhood. By exposing the link between violence, the right to speech and silence I hope to have established how these factors influenced her development as a writer.

96 hooks, Ain’t I A Woman?, p.11.