

Bell Hooks

1952-

bell hooks has spent a lifetime deriving what is needed to bridge cultural, gender, and racial divides. Her mission has been to develop constructs where scholars, activists, and readers can accomplish this. She has brought how we talk about race in an evolving “post racial” era to the forefront.

Born Gloria Jean Watkins on September 25, 1952, bell hooks was reared in rural Hopkinsville, Kentucky. She says her neighborhood was a world where folks were content to get by on a little, where her maternal grandmother made soap, dug fishing worms, set traps for rabbits, made butter and wine, sewed quilts, and wrung the necks of chickens. She believes her home community turned the hardships created by racial segregation and racism into a source of strength.

Gloria was one of six siblings: five sisters and a brother. Her father worked as a janitor, and her mother, Rosa Bell Oldham Watkins, worked as a maid in the homes of white families. hooks was taught in a segregated school by strong teachers, mostly single black women, who helped to shape the self-esteem of children of color. By the time she was ten, hooks had begun writing her own poetry and soon developed a reputation for her ability to recite poetry.

She developed a strong sense of self that allowed some black women to speak out against racism and sexism. She is a poet, fictionist, and most well known as a writer of critical essays on systems of domination.

After high school, she accepted a scholarship to Stanford University, in California. During her early college years, she began *Ain't I a Woman*, which examines how black women, throughout modern history, have been oppressed by white men, black men, and white women. *The book* became central in discussions of racism and sexism. Eleven years later, *Publishers*

Weekly ranked it among the "twenty most influential women's books of the previous twenty years."

She obtained her BA in English from Stanford University in 1973, and her MA in English from the University of Wisconsin–Madison in 1976. In 1983, she completed her doctorate in literature at the University of California, Santa Cruz, with a dissertation on author Toni Morrison.

It was in her role as a teacher that hooks felt she was doing her most important work. She knew that for a people historically and legally denied the right to education, teaching was one of the most substantial forms of political resistance she could choose.

After holding various positions at the University of California in Santa Cruz, California, in the early 1980s, hooks left for Yale University in New Haven, Connecticut, where she had the opportunity to teach African American Studies. In 1988, she joined the faculty at Oberlin College, in Ohio, where she taught Women's Studies. In 1995, she accepted a post with the City College of New York. She currently serves as Distinguished Professor in Residence at Berea College in Berea, Kentucky.

hooks' awards include: American Book Award, Before Columbus Foundation, 1991, for *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics*; Writer's Award, Lila Wallace/Reader's Digest Fund, 1994; Image Award nomination, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, 2001, for *Happy to Be Nappy*; Children's Book of the Year designation, Bank Street College, 2002, for *Homemade Love*; Hurston Wright Legacy Award nomination, 2002, for *Salvation: Black People and Love*.

hooks lives in New York City and remains an important figure in the fight against racism and sexism in America. To date, hooks has published more than thirty-four books, with more to come. She remains active as a speaker and mentor, particularly in the collegiate setting.