

of data profiling” (163). The monograph closes with some recent examples of positive uses of algorithms and social networking in social activist circles.

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## ***Becoming bell hooks: A Story about the Self-Empowerment of a Black Girl Who Became a Feminist*. By Aneta Ostaszewska. U of Warsaw P, 2023, 161 pp.**

The latest publication by Aneta Ostaszewska, director of the Centre for Women’s and Gender Research at the University of Warsaw, *Becoming bell hooks: A Story about the Self-Empowerment of a Black Girl Who Became a Feminist*, is an academic exploration of the life and intellectual evolution of Gloria Jean Watkins (1952–2021), better known under her pen name bell hooks. As the blurb on the last page summarizes, Ostaszewska’s book examines the autobiographical dimension of hooks’ literary oeuvre, for “it is a story about the ‘biographical work’ of a woman who creates herself in the course of writing her biography.” By focusing her analysis on how the personal intersects with the political in hooks’ development as an acclaimed feminist thinker, Ostaszewska investigates how the feminist theorist established her identity through the act of writing and the construction of her autobiography. The latter resulted in hooks’ transformation from a Black girl growing up in Hopkinsville, Kentucky, into one of the most significant voices in contemporary feminist discourse. The central premise of Ostaszewska’s publication, therefore, is that hooks’ intellectual journey

was significantly influenced by her autobiography. The author, whose research is concerned with life writing and women's rights studies, considers the autobiographical process as a vital emancipatory tool that encouraged hooks to rewrite and reimagine her life story through her essays, books, and feminist activism. The original edition of *Becoming bell hooks* in Polish was published in 2018. The 2023 English edition was prompted by hooks' unexpected passing in December 2021 and is a revised, updated, and completed version of the 2018 edition (Ostaszewska 7).

Ostaszewska's introduction tackles a question that begs to be asked: Why write a book about bell hooks? The author describes her initial personal curiosity, which increasingly merged with her academic interest, in hooks as a person and her impact as an acclaimed intellectual and leading representative of (Black) feminist discourse in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Ostaszewska's approach was two-fold: She was compelled to understand hooks' "biographical experiences through the lens of a female subject, and . . . [she wanted] to meta-analyze them using the concept of biographical work" (9). This idea was guided by her observation that "[a]utobiographical writing, especially feminist autobiographical writing, sets . . . [writers like hooks] on a path to emancipation and development" (9) and provides vital insights in the "process of becoming" (10). Furthermore, hooks' call to "speak with your voice" (7) that mirrors the postcolonial notion of talking back is prominently discussed in hooks' 1989 essay collection *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black*, which became a key directive for Ostaszewska in composing *Becoming bell hooks*. This meant for her to write from an engaged, feminist standpoint, which, with view to Ostaszewska, is strongly influenced by Rosi Braidotti's definition of it and Vikki Bell's concept of "feminist imagination" (10), challenging not only patriarchal social structures but also the androcentric traditions of academia.

*Becoming bell hooks* is divided into six chapters. The first two, "Autobiography as a Research Field" and "Biographical Work as a Tool for Self-Empowerment," establish the theoretical framework. In chapter one, Ostaszewska focuses on autobiographical studies and highlights their relevance for social research beyond its primary status as a literary genre. She particularly foregrounds the features and characteristics of women's autobiographical writing as the book centers around the person of hooks and her literary oeuvre (31–49). In her second chapter, the author introduces concepts such as biographical work and explores terms such as biographicity and *Bildung*, which are of vital importance in her discourse (52–56). Her aim is to show that biographical work provides rich insights for feminist research into the formation of subjectivity and self-empowerment, framed within an autobiographical narrative (13).

Both chapters lay the conceptual groundwork for the empirical analysis of her selected material in chapters five and six. Her literary corpus consists of hooks' autobiographical texts, which were published within less than a decade: *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black* (1989), *Bone Black: Memories of Girlhood* (1996), and *Wounds of Passion: A Writing Life* (1997) (62–64).

In chapter three, “The Research Approach,” and chapter four, “Reconstruction of bell hooks's Biography,” Ostaszewska examines “the importance of close reading in analytical work and reflect[s] on the role of feminist methodologies in biographical research” (15). At the end of chapter three, she pays particular attention to outlining analytical strategies used in the biographical method as proposed by French sociologists Daniel Bertaux and Catherine Delcroix (78–85). A detailed presentation of the empirical material, i.e., the selected three books written by hooks listed above, is provided in chapter four.

In the fifth and sixth chapters, “bell hooks as a Narrator, Biographical Subject and Observer” and “Reception and Criticism: bell hooks's Self-Empowerment,” the author conducts an in-depth analysis of her corpus material, exploring the roles hooks' adopts as a narrator, biographical subject and commentator of her own life (108–25). Ostaszewska reflects on how feminist consciousness shaped hooks' self-discovery (132). In the sixth and final chapter, the author explores hooks' idea, which she outlines in *Wounds of Passion*, of “mapping a different destiny” (hooks x) through autobiographical writing. In this context, Ostaszewska argues “that the writing of an autobiography constitutes an emancipatory process and, as a self-empowering activity, enables the creation of an autonomous space for the expression of one's own voice, [and] hence [reflects hooks' directive of] ‘speaking with one's own voice’” (14).

Ostaszewska concludes *Becoming bell hooks* with an “Afterword: To Read bell hooks,” in which she makes analogies between hooks' autobiographical writing and the experience of women in post-communist Poland, focusing on empowerment through reclaiming one's agency and the notion of talking back. However, the parallels the author draws here require critical reflection, a fact she is conscious of, as she writes: “I was aware that it was risky to build any analogies between the situation of a white woman in Poland . . . and that of a Black woman in American society” (145). While this comparison is indeed insightful, it at times risks oversimplifying the differences between the experiences of Black women in the United States and women in a predominantly white, post-communist society. hooks' work is deeply rooted in her identity as a Black woman in the United States, shaped by the legacies of slavery, racism, and the intersection of race, gender, and class. Hence, her act of talking back

and reclaiming her voice was a vital tool for her in challenging systemic racial oppression. Ostaszewska's attempt to apply hooks' framework to the Polish context is valuable, still the racial and national specificities need to be considered and critically examined.

Another point of objection could be "that the events described by bell hooks and the memories that she recalled are considered to constitute 'autobiographical truth,' which means that . . . [Ostaszewska] did not question their authenticity, nor did . . . [she] attempt to verify them in any way" (145). Since a potential issue with autobiographical truth lies in the complex relationship between subjective experience, personal memory, and historical or factual accuracy, Ostaszewska opted for treating the three selected books by hooks' "as a narrative reconstructed of her own life, written under specific circumstances and for a specific purpose" (145). By making the decision to regard them as constructed narratives created in a certain context and with a clear intention in mind, it is implied that the author is aware of hooks' subjectivity and the relationality of her texts with view to the socio-political and historic zeitgeist at the time of their publication.

*Becoming bell hooks* provides valuable insights for researchers operating at the intersections of autobiographical studies, Black studies, literary studies, feminism, and sociology. It serves as an essential resource for those intrigued by transcending disciplinary boundaries between these research fields and who are eager to engage with complex, interdisciplinary perspectives. Ostaszewska's expertise and personal connection with bell hooks enrich her discourse, offering scholars a nuanced and multifaceted understanding of hooks' work, its reception, and its broader socio-political implications.

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