

Take all day if you have to
with your mirror and your bracelet of song.)

Fact is, the invention of women under siege
has been to sharpen love in the service of myth.

If you can't be free, be a mystery.

—1987

BELL HOOKS (1952-)

Feminist scholar and anti-racist cultural critic bell hooks was born Gloria Jean Watkins in Hopkinsville, Kentucky, one of seven children. Her father, Veodis Watkins, worked as a custodian for the postal service and her mother, Rosa Bell Watkins, worked as a domestic. Growing up Black in a small, segregated Southern town, hooks developed a reputation for speaking her mind; it was a quality she shared with her maternal great-grandmother, whose name she chose to use as a pseudonym when she published her first book. hooks received a scholarship to attend Stanford University, where she earned her B.A. in 1973. Her experience there was marked by profound culture shock—the atmosphere was less liberal than she expected, and not all of her professors were welcoming to Black students. hooks became very involved with the feminist movement while at Stanford, but was dismayed at the utter lack of attention to the interests of Black women and to the intersections of sexism with racism and class politics. She began writing her first book, *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism*, during her second year, and continued to work on it as she pursued her M.A. at the University of Wisconsin, Madison (1976), and her Ph.D. at the University of California, Santa Cruz (1983). *Ain't I a Woman* was published in 1981 by South End Press and immediately established hooks' reputation as a major feminist theorist as well as a critic of feminism. hooks has made many important contributions to the scholarly areas of feminism, critical race theory, and radical pedagogy, including *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (1984), *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (1990), *Teaching to Transgress: Education As the Practice of Freedom* (1994), *Killing Rage: Ending Racism* (1995), *Feminism Is for Everybody: Passionate Politics* (2000), and *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope* (2003). She has also published poetry, children's books, essays, and autobiographical writing, including *Bone Black: Memories of Girlhood* (1996), the volume from which the following selection is taken. In her more recent work, such as *The Will to Change: Men, Masculinity, and Love* (2004), hooks has turned her attention to a critical rethinking of masculinity.

from *Bone Black* *Memories of Girlhood*

1

Mama has given me a quilt from her hope chest. It is one her mother's mother made. It is a quilt of stars—each piece taken from faded-cotton summer dresses—each piece stitched by hand. She has given me a beaded purse that belonged to my father's

mother Sister Ray. They want to know why she has given it to me since I was not Sister Ray's favorite. They say she is probably turning over in her grave angry that I have something of hers.

Mama tells us—her daughters—that the girls in her family started gathering things for their hope chest when they were very young, gathering all the things that they would carry with them into marriage. The first time she opens hers for us I feel I am witnessing yet another opening of Pandora's box,¹ that the secrets of her youth, the bittersweet memories, will come rushing out like a waterfall and push us back in time. Instead the scent of cedar fills the air. It reminds me of Christmas, of abandoned trees, standing naked in the snow after the celebrations are over. Usually we are not invited to share in the opening of the chest. Even though we stand near her watching, she acts as if we are not there. I see her remembering, clutching tightly in her hand some object, some bit of herself that she has had to part with in order to live in the present. I see her examining each hope to see if it has been fulfilled, if the promises have been kept. I pretend I do not see the tears in her eyes. I am glad she shares the opening of the chest this time with all of us. I am clutching the gifts she hands to me, the quilt, the beaded purse. She knows that I am often hopeless. She stores no treasures for my coming marriage. I do not want to be given away. I cannot contain my dreams until tomorrow. I cannot wait for someone else, a stranger, to take my hand.

That night in my sleep I dream of going away. I am taking the bus. Mama is standing waving good-bye. Later when I return from my journey I come home only to find there has been a fire, nothing remains of our house and I can see no one. There is only the dark and the thick smell of smoke. I stand alone weeping. The sound of my sobbing is like the cry of the peacock. Suddenly they appear with candles, mama and everyone. They say they have heard my sorrow pierce the air like the cry of the peacock, that they have come to comfort me. They give me a candle. Together we search the ashes for bits and pieces, any fragment of our lives that may have survived. We find that the hope chest has not burned through and through. We open it, taking out the charred remains. Someone finds a photo, one face has turned to ash, another is there. We pass around the fragments like bread and wine at communion. The chorus of weeping is our testimony that we are moved.

Louder than our weeping is a voice commanding us to stop our tears. We cannot see who is speaking but we are reminded of the stern sound of our mother's mother's voice. We listen. She tells us to sit close in the night, to make a circle of our bodies, to place the candles at the center of the circle. The candles burn like another fire only this time she says the fire burns to warm our hearts. She says Listen, let me tell you a story. She begins to put together in words all that has been destroyed in the fire. We are all rejoicing when the dream ends.

The next day I want to know what the dream means, who she is, this storyteller who comes in the night. Saru, mama's mother, is the interpreter of dreams. She tells me that I should know the storyteller, that I and she are one, that they are my sisters, family. She says that a part of me is making the story, making the words, making the new fire, that it is my heart burning in the center of the flames.

We live in the country. We children do not understand that that means we are among the poor. We do not understand that the outhouses behind many of the houses are still there because running water came here long after they had it in the city. We do not understand that our playmates who are eating laundry starch do so not because the white powder tastes so good but because they are sometimes without necessary food. We do not understand that we wash with the heavy, unsmelling, oddly shaped pieces of homemade lye soap because real soap costs money. We never think about where lye soap comes from. We only know we want to make our skin itch less—that we do not want our mouths to be washed out with it. Because we are poor, because we live in the country, we go to the country school—the little white wood-frame building where all the country kids come. They come from miles and miles away. They come so far because they are black. As they are riding the school buses they pass school after school where children who are white can attend without being bused, without getting up in the wee hours of the morning, sometimes leaving home in the dark.

We are not bused. The school is only a mile or two away from our house. We get to walk. We get to wander aimlessly in the road—until a car comes by. We get to wave at the buses. They are not allowed to stop and give us a ride. We do not understand why. Daddy says the walk to school will be good for us. He tells us again and again in a harsh voice of the miles he walked to school through fields in the snow, without boots or gloves to keep him warm. We are not comforted by the image of the small boy trudging along many miles to school so he can learn to read and be somebody. When we close our eyes he becomes real to us. He looks very sad. Sometimes he cries. We are not at all comforted. And there are still days when we complain about the walk, especially when it is wet and stormy.

School begins with chapel. There we recite the Pledge of Allegiance to the Flag. We have no feeling for the flag but we like the words; said in unison, they sound like a chant. We then listen to a morning prayer. We say the Lord's Prayer. It is the singing that makes morning chapel the happiest moment of the day. It is there I learn to sing "Red River Valley."² It is a song about missing and longing. I do not understand all the words, only the feeling—warm wet sorrow, like playing games in spring rain. After chapel we go to classrooms.

In the first grade the teacher gives tasting parties. She brings us different foods to taste so that we can know what they are like because we do not eat them in our homes. All of us eagerly await the Fridays when the tasting part will begin. The day she brings cottage cheese I am not sure I want to try it. She makes me. She makes everyone try a little bit just in case they might really like it. We go home from the tasting parties telling our parents what it was like, telling them to buy this new good food, better food, better than any food we have ever tasted.

Mama tells us that most of that food we taste isn't good to eat all the time, that it is a waste of money. We do not understand money. We do not know that we are all poor. We cannot visit many of the friends we make because they live miles and miles away. We have each other after school. [...]

We learn early that it is important for a woman to marry. We are always marrying our dolls to someone. He of course is always invisible, that is until they made the Ken doll to go with Barbie. One of us has been given a Barbie doll for Christmas. Her skin is not white white but almost brown from the tan they have painted on her. We know she is white because of her blond hair. The newest Barbie is bald, with many wigs of all different colors. We spend hours dressing and undressing her, pretending she is going somewhere important. We want to make new clothes for her. We want to buy the outfits made just for her that we see in the store but they are too expensive. Some of them cost as much as real clothes for real people. Barbie is anything but real, that is why we like her. She never does housework, washes dishes, or has children to care for. She is free to spend all day dreaming about the Kens of the world. Mama laughs when we tell her there should be more than one Ken for Barbie, there should be Joe, Sam, Charlie, men in all shapes and sizes. We do not think that Barbie should have a girlfriend. We know that Barbie was born to be alone—that the fantasy woman, the soap opera girl, the girl of *True Confessions*, the Miss America girl was born to be alone. We know that she is not us.

My favorite doll is brown, brown like light milk chocolate. She is a baby doll and I give her a baby doll name, Baby. She is almost the same size as a real baby. She comes with no clothes, only a pink diaper, fastened with tiny gold pins and a plastic bottle. She has a red mouth the color of lipstick slightly open so that we can stick the bottle in it. We fill the bottle with water and wait for it to come through the tiny hole in Baby's bottom. We make her many new diapers, but we are soon bored with changing them. We lose the bottle and Baby can no longer drink. We still love her. She is the only doll we will not destroy. We have lost Barbie. We have broken the leg of another doll. We have cracked open the head of an antique doll to see what makes the crying sound. The little thing inside is not interesting. We are sorry but nothing can be done—not even mama can put the pieces together again. She tells us that if this is the way we intend to treat our babies she hopes we do not have any. She laughs at our careless parenting. Sometimes she takes a minute to show us the right thing to do. She too is terribly fond of Baby. She says that she looks so much like a real newborn. Once she came upstairs, saw Baby under the covers, and wanted to know who had brought the real baby from downstairs.

She loves to tell the story of how Baby was born. She tells us that I, her problem child, decided out of nowhere that I did not want a white doll to play with, I demanded a brown doll, one that would look like me. Only grown-ups think that the things children say come out of nowhere. We know they come from the deepest parts of ourselves. Deep within myself I had begun to worry that all this loving care we gave to the pink and white flesh-colored dolls meant that somewhere left high on the shelves were boxes of unwanted, unloved brown dolls covered in dust. I thought that they would remain there forever, orphaned and alone, unless someone began to want them, to want to give them love and care, to want them more than anything. At first they ignored my wanting. They complained. They pointed out that white dolls were easier to find, cheaper. They never said where they found Baby but I know. She was always there high on the shelf, covered in dust—waiting. [...]

² Folk song dating back to the late 19th century.

We cannot believe we must leave our beloved Crispus Attucks and go to schools in the white neighborhoods. We cannot imagine what it will be like to walk by the principal's office and see a man who will not know our name, who will not care about us. Already the grown-ups are saying it will be nothing but trouble, but they do not protest. Already we feel like the cattle in the stockyard near our house, herded, prodded, pushed. Already we prepare ourselves to go willingly to what will be a kind of slaughter, for parts of ourselves must be severed to make this integration of schools work. We start by leaving behind the pleasure we will feel in going to our all-black school, in seeing friends, in being a part of a school community. Our pleasure is replaced by fear. We must rise early to catch the buses that will take us to the white schools. So early that we must go into the gymnasium and wait for the other students, the white students, to arrive. Again we are herded, prodded, pushed, told not to make trouble in this early morning waiting period.

Sometimes there is protest. Everyone black walks out, except for those whose parents have warned that there will be no walking out of school. I do not walk out. I do not believe that any demands made will be met. We surrendered the right to demand when the windows to Attucks were covered with wood and barred shut, when the doors were locked. Anyhow, mama has warned us about walking out. The walkouts make everything worse. More than ever before we are cattle, to be herded, prodded, pushed. More than ever before we are slaughtered. We can hear the sound of the paddles reverberating in the hallway as black boys are struck by the white principals. The word spreads rapidly when one of us has been sent home not knowing when and if they will be allowed to come back.

Some of us are chosen. We are allowed to sit in the classes with white students. We are told that we are smart. We are the good servants who will be looked to. We are to stand between the white administration and the black student body. We are not surprised that black boys are not in the smart classes, even though we know that many of them are smart. We know that white folks have this thing about black boys sitting in classes with white girls. Now and then a smart black boy is moved into the classes. They have been watching him. He has proved himself. We know that we are all being watched, that we must prove ourselves. We no longer like attending school. We are tired of the long hours spent discussing what can be done to make integration work. We discuss with them knowing all the while that they want us to do something, to change, to make ourselves into carbon copies of them so that they can forget we are here, so that they can forget the injustice of their past. They are not prepared to change.

Although black and white attend the same school, blacks sit with blacks and whites with whites. In the cafeteria there is no racial mixing. When hands reach out to touch across these boundaries whites protest, blacks protest as well. Each one seeing it as a going over to the other side. School is a place where we came face to face with racism. When we walk through the rows of national guardsmen with their uniforms and guns we think that we will be the first to die, to lay our bodies down. We feel despair and long for the days when school was a place where we learned to love and celebrate ourselves, a place where we were number one. [...]

CHERRÍE MORAGA (1952-)

Cherríe Moraga is a renowned Chicana feminist essayist, poet, dramatist, and editor. Born in Whittier, California, on September 25, 1952, to a Mexican-American mother and an Anglo-American father, her biracial and bilingual heritage—like her lesbian sexuality—are central themes in her writing. In 1981, she co-edited *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* with Gloria Anzaldúa. This anthology of prose and poetry marked a turning point in the U.S. feminist movement. In its pages, women of color launched an unflinching critique of the racism and classism inherent in the white feminist movement, as well as a critique of the sexism and homophobia within the various minority nationalist movements of the 1970s. Unable to find a publisher for the collection, Moraga co-founded one of the earliest publishing houses focusing on writing by queer women and women of color in the U.S., Kitchen Table/Women of Color Press. *This Bridge Called My Back*, which won the Before Columbus American Book Award, has become a mainstay of feminist studies courses. Moraga's follow-up book of essays and poetry, *Loving in the War Years* (1983), continued to explore racism within the Anglo and Chicano communities, the relationship between language and sexuality, and the intimate relationship between nationalism and sexism. Moraga's skills as a dramatist have met with similar acclaim, and her plays have been staged in theaters across the country. In 1984, she was selected for a prestigious dramatist-in-residency program at INTAR (Hispanic-American Arts Center) in New York City, which was followed by an artist-in-residency at Brava! Theater Center in San Francisco (1991-1997), sponsored by the California Arts Council and the Theater Communications Group. Currently, Moraga is an artist-in-residence at Stanford University, where she teaches Latino theatre, playwriting, creative writing, and U.S. Latina/o literature for the Drama and the Spanish and Portuguese departments.

La Güera

It requires something more than personal experience to gain a philosophy or point of view from any specific event. It is the quality of our response to the event and our capacity to enter into the lives of others that help us to make their lives and experiences our own.

Emma Goldman¹

I am the very well-educated daughter of a woman who, by the standards in this country, would be considered largely illiterate. My mother was born in Santa Paula, Southern California, at a time when much of the central valley there was still farm land. Nearly thirty-five years later, in 1948, she was the only daughter of six to marry an anglo, my father.

I remember all of my mother's stories, probably much better than she realizes. She is a fine story-teller, recalling every event of her life with the vividness of the present, noting each detail right down to the cut and color of her dress. I remember stories of her being pulled out of school at the ages of five, seven, nine, and eleven to work in the fields, along with her brothers and sisters; stories of her father drinking away whatever small profit she was able to make for the family; of her going the long way home to avoid meeting him on the street, staggering toward the same destination. I remember stories of my mother lying about her age in order to get a job as a hat-check