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Between Grandma and Granddaughter – The Process of Becoming a Black Woman in a Racist Society. An Analysis of Intergenerational Transmission on the Example of bell hooks' autobiography *Bone Black: Memories of Girlhood*

Abstract

The aim of the essay is to discuss an intergenerational transmission of family history and its impact on the process of becoming a Black woman in a racist society. The example chosen for analysis is the autobiography of bell hooks, *Bone Black: Memories of Girlhood* (1996), which is a story about girlhood. (B)ell hooks is a pen name of Gloria Jean Watkins, an African-American scholar and writer whose childhood and adolescence were during the period of racial segregation and desegregation in the 1960s of the twentieth century. (B)ell hooks writes *Bone Black* to reflect on being a Black girl growing up in racially segregated American society in the 60s of the twentieth century. She shows the historical and political contexts of her growing up, however, it is the local community and intergenerational family ties that she places at the center of her process of becoming the woman: bell hooks. Relationships with women, particularly a relationship between grandmother and granddaughter are of great significance in this process. The essay begins with a brief summary of the biography of bell hooks and a description of *Bone Black,* with particular emphasis put on the author's inter- and intragenerational relationships with women. Next, I will move on to discuss the intergenerational transmissions of family history and their impact on the process of becoming a woman. For this purpose, I will refer to the life story concept introduced by Daniel Bertaux (2016), and the notion of subjective resources created by Catherine Delcroix (1999, 2014), in order to discuss the importance of intergenerational transmission of life stories in the process of becoming the woman knowns as "bell hooks."

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Między babcią a wnuczką – proces stawania się Czarną kobietą w społeczeństwie zróżnicowanym rasowo. Analiza przekazu międzypokoleniowego na przykładzie autobiografii bell hooks *Bone Black: Memories of Girlhood*

Abstrakt

Celem eseju jest omówienie międzypokoleniowego przekazu historii rodziny i jej wpływu na proces stawania się Czarną kobietą w społeczeństwie zróżnicowanym rasowo. Przykładem wybranym do analizy jest autobiografia bell hooks pt. *Bone Black: Memories of Girlhood* (1996), książka będąca opowieścią o dziewczyństwie. (B)ell hooks to pseudonim Glorii Jean Watkins, afroamerykańskiej intelektualistki i pisarki, której dzieciństwo i młodość przypadły na okres segregacji rasowej i desegregacji w latach 60. XX wieku. (B)ell hooks napisała Bone Black, aby zastanowić się, co to znaczy być Czarną dziewczyną dorastającą w społeczeństwie amerykańskim w latach 60. XX wieku. Autorka pokazuje historyczne i polityczne konteksty procesu dorastania, jednak w centrum zainteresowania stawia lokalną społeczność i międzypokoleniowe więzi rodzinne. Duże znaczenie w procesie stawania się kobietą mają dla niej relacje z matką oraz babcią. Esej rozpoczyna się krótkim streszczeniem biografii bell hooks oraz opisem Bone Black, z naciskiem na międzypokoleniowe i wewnątrzrodzinne relacje autorki z kobietami. Następnie odwołuję się do koncepcji historii życia autorstwa Daniela Bertaux (*life story*) oraz zasobów osobistych (*personal resources*) autorstwa Catherine Delcroix, aby omówić znaczenie międzypokoleniowych przekazów historii rodziny w procesie stawania się kobietą znaną jako bell hooks.

Słowa kluczowe: przekaz międzypokoleniowy, historia rodziny, historia życia, Czarna kobieta, bell hooks.

Introduction

The aim of this essay is to discuss an intergenerational transmission of family history and its impact on the process of becoming a Black woman in a racist society. The example I refer to is the autobiography of bell hooks, *Bone Black: Memories of Girlhood* (1996), a story about girlhood. (B)ell hooks wrote *Bone Black* to reflect on how she remembers growing up as a Black girl in the racially segregated American society of the 1960s. She depicts the historical and political contexts of her growing up, however, it is the local community and the intergenerational family ties that she places at the center of her process of becoming the woman known as bell hooks. Relationships with women, particularly a relationship between a grandmother and a granddaughter, are portrayed as especially significant in this process.

The essay begins with a brief summary of the biography of bell hooks and a description of *Bone Black,* with particular emphasis put on the author's inter- and intragenerational relationships with women. Next, I will move on to discuss the intergenerational transmissions of family history and their impact on the process of becoming a woman. For this purpose, I will refer to the life story concept introduced by Daniel Bertaux (2016), and the notion of subjective resources created by Catherine Delcroix (1999, 2014).

bell hooks who is Gloria Jean Watkins

(B)ell hooks is the pen name of Gloria Jean Watkins, an African-American intellectual, writer, poet, social activist, and feminist. She made her debut in 1978 with a volume of poetry entitled *And There We Wept*, published as bell hooks, a name adopted in honor of her great-grandmother, Bell Blair Hooks. She was born in 1952 in Hopkinsville, Kentucky. Her childhood and adolescence were during the period of racial segregation and desegregation (1960s) in the United States. Difficult living conditions and social exclusion, manifesting, among others, in the territorial division of the town, was the daily life of African-Americans in that period. Separating them from white inhabitants of Hopkinsville led to the formation of closed communities. Fear and mutual distrust among racially divided inhabitants prevailed in the small community in Hopkinsville. (B)ell hooks grew up in an isolated community, focused on its separation from whites. When racial segregation was officially abolished in public schools, she was moved to an integrated school. At that time, she received her first life lessons regarding racism and sexism. She writes:

> Those periods in our adolescent lives of racial desegregation had been full of hostility, rage, conflict, and loss. We black kids had been angry that we had to leave our beloved all-black high school Crispus Attucks and be bussed halfway cross town to integrate white schools. We had to make the journey and thus bear the responsibility of making desegregation a reality. We had to give up the familiar and enter a world that seemed cold and strange, not our world, not our school. We were certainly on the margin, no longer at the center, and it hurt. It was such an unhappy time (bell hooks 1993: 4).

Those school years had deep impact on how bell hooks perceived her social position as a young person as well as later, when she would write about American society and the existence of the color caste system. Her school years were full of memories of dehumanization, however, at the same time, these experiences influenced the development of her racial and feminist consciousness.

While growing up, bell hooks discovered her greatest passion – books and poetry. From the age of ten, she dreamed of becoming a poet. However, this dream was not approved by her parents who did not share her intellectual ambitions; they wanted their daughter to get married or to get a job as a primary school teacher. For the girl, poetry became a strategy for dealing with difficult experiences, such as loneliness

and (domestic) violence. Reading books made her discover a better world than the one she knew from her everyday life. However, as she was following her dreams, at the same time hooks was distancing herself from her family; her ambitions were in direct opposition to the plans of her parents. As bell hooks recalls, "I was mapping a different destiny" (bell hooks 1997: x). In spite of the will of her parents, she decided to study in California, where she applied to Stanford University in Palo Alto. She completed her BA in 1973. Already during her studies, she started working on the book *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism,* which was finally published many years later, in 1981. She graduated from the University of Wisconsin and obtained her master's degree in English literature in 1976. Seven years later she defended her doctoral dissertation in literature (thesis title: *Keeping a Hold On Life: Reading Toni Morrison's Fiction*) at the University of California in Santa Cruz.

In the 1980s, bell hooks continued to develop her professional career: she was a professor at Yale University, and she published a number of highly regarded books, including *Feminist Theory from Margin to Centre* (1984), a publication that established bell hooks as one of the most influential voices in intersectional feminist theory. In the 1990s, she worked, among others places, at Oberlin College (Ohio) and at the City College of New York. During this period, she published several volumes, including a collection of essays, *Talking Back. Thinking Feminist. Thinking Black* (1989), and the book that would be considered her pedagogical manifesto: *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (1994). At that time, she also published her two autobiographies: *Bone Black: Memories of Girlhood* (1996) and *Wounds of Passion* (1997). In 2004, as Distinguished Professor in Residence, she began working with Berea College in her home state, Kentucky. In 2014, the bell hooks Institute was established in Berea. She died on December 15, 2021.

Memories of girlhood – a girl's rebellion

The book *Bone Black: Memories of Girlhood* is a peculiar kind of autobiography: a dialectic of fact and fiction. It is a collection of short stories depicting both what had happened and what might have happened, or could be a creation or a dream. *Bone Black* does not refer directly to events and experiences, but to some of the impressions and emotions that are still remembered, those which survive in the memory and therefore determine the mood of the past as it is remembered by bell hooks. According to the author, *Bone Black* is not so much about biographical accuracy but rather about portraying the state of mind of the protagonist, the mood of her past that she strives to describe and reflect on: "In *Bone Black* I gather together the dreams, fantasies, experiences that preoccupied me as a girl, which stay with me and appear and reappear in different shapes and forms in all my work" (bell hooks 1996: xiv).

Memory, as bell hooks claims, cannot be used passively to recreate the past, or be treated simply as nostalgia for something that has already passed. The role of memory is to transform the present, and while acknowledging that writing

about the past can have emancipatory power, hooks nevertheless posits it as an opportunity to abandon the position of a pariah and attempt to "rewrite oneself" (bell hooks 1991: 40).

Apart from the introduction, there are no comments in the book from the perspective of an adult woman talking about her girlhood. Nothing interrupts the flow of the narrative, which is sometimes conducted in the third person, as if the author wanted to distance herself from her own biography. The story has no linear order. Fantasies and pieces of her memories are combined with each other, and it is difficult to indicate the exact beginning and end of her story. Most importantly, *Bone Black* documents everything which remains most vivid for bell hooks. These collected memories and stories are "the foundation on which I have built a life in writing, a life committed to intellectual pursuits" (bell hooks 1996: xiv).

Bone Black does not provide any time labels or mention any specific dates, but from the context it is understandable that the narrative takes place sometime in the 1960s. As bell hooks emphasized, it is a story that addresses the experience of Black girls. It is an account of her rebellion, a story of a "struggle to create self and identity distinct from yet inclusive of the world around [her]" (bell hooks 1996: xi). Her story illustrates a variety of social ills she had witnessed while living in a poor Black rural community. For bell hooks, being Black is as much fundamental for her identity as being a woman. Race, class, and gender are inseparable for her when it comes to defining herself as a Black woman.

In the circle of women

As a young person bell hooks began to understand that inequalities begin at home. They develop from the differences in the ways parents, both advantaged and disadvantaged, interact with their children. For women born in the first half of the twentieth century (and earlier), there was only one path of a socially accepted life – marriage and motherhood. "Wedding in a white dress" and being a mother were considered to be the greatest life dream of every girl and woman. This kind of cultural message dominated in intergenerational transmission; it was reproduced especially in the mother-daughter relationship.

The figures of maternal women take center stage in the stories told by bell hooks. The mother is presented in many ways in the memories of her daughter, sometimes she is idealized, other times – criticized. The mother that smiles at her is the mother admired by bell hooks. The mother who is happy, "energetic, noisy, silly, funny, fussy, strong, capable, tender" (bell hooks 1996: 98), whenever the father leaves the house, but when he comes back, she immediately becomes gloomy, at once transforming into her husband's wife. The presence of the father at home makes all joy disappear from the mother's eyes: "She reminded the daughter of the dog sitting obediently, until you, the master, the head of the house, gave her orders

to move, to do this to do that, to cook his food just so, to make sure the house was clean just so" (bell hooks 1996: 98).

The daughter does not understand why her mother tolerates domestic violence and child abuse. The mother's lack of action when her father uses violence both against her and their children, destroys the bond between women. When he is angry, the mother freezes in silence, she is afraid of him, as bell hooks (1996: 30) writes: "The mama stood watching, afraid of this anger, afraid of what it might do, but too afraid to stop it". (B)ell hooks finds it difficult to understand that her mother agrees to be subordinated by a man. She tries to justify her mother who is loyal to her husband but not to children: "In some way I understand that it has to do with marriage, that to be the wife to the husband she must be willing to sacrifice even her daughters for his good. For the mother it is not simple. She is always torn" (bell hooks 1996: 151).

The figure of the mother depicted in *Bone Black* is an example of a patriarchal mother, the one who damages a daughter's ability to experience self-empowerment by imposing the demand for obedience in exchange for her mother's love. In this manner, female oppression is reproduced in the mother-daughter relationships from generation to generation. Adrienne Rich noted that:

> Few women growing up in patriarchal society can feel mothered enough; the power of our mothers, whatever their love for us and their struggles on our behalf, is too restricted. And it is the mother through whom patriarchy early teaches the small female her proper expectations (Rich 1976: 243).

The mother-daughter relationships are therefore always marked with guilt. "The proper expectations," mentioned by Rich, are nothing more than a consent to impose gender inequality in both family and public life. The mother, wanting to protect her daughter from disappointments in the future, at the same time prepares her to meet expectations which severely limit her own subjectivity.

"We learn early that it is important for a woman to marry", confesses bell hooks (1996: 22). She describes the life lesson she was taught by her mother as follows (writing in the third person): "Her mother is telling her again and again about the importance of learning to cook, clean, etc., in order to be a good wife" (bell hooks 1996: 97). However, bell hooks did not want to get married and spend a lifetime being a wife and a mother. She tells her mother that "marriage is for men, that women get nothing out of it, and men do everything" (bell hooks 1996: 98). Speaking of her dislike for marriage, at the same time she does not want her mother to know that it is precisely her marriage to her father that has made her daughter disvalue the entire idea of marriage. (B)ell hooks (1996: 98) writes, "whatever joy there was in marriage was something the women kept to themselves, a secret they did not share with one another or their daughters".

The author's attitude toward her mother illustrates matrophobia, or fear of becoming one's own mother (Rich 1976: 236). (B)ell hooks did not want to repeat her mother's life scenario. Observing her mother's life, the girl discovers what she does

not want for herself. First of all, she refuses to limit her independence. In this sense, the mother became a negative figure for bell hooks. This negative identification with the mother is a starting point on the path of defining the daughter's own identity.

The art of making quilts—the relationship between grandmother and granddaughter

The relationship between bell hooks and her maternal grandmother is the most important example of positive identification with a woman in *Bone Black*. From her perspective, the grandmother is a fighter: she is a Black woman who is not afraid to speak. The author wants to be like her grandmother and is proud of her heritage, "She tells me that she has inherited this fighting spirit from her mother, and that I may have a little of it too early to tell" (bell hooks 1996: 53).

The grandmother represents a symbolic figure in the autobiography of bell hooks; she symbolizes women's wisdom, emancipation, and independence. She is an essential part of the archetypal triad, which consists of three generations of women: grandmother, mother, and daughter. The relationship that connects the eldest and the youngest of women (grandmother and granddaughter) does not resemble the bond between a mother and a daughter. The authority of a grandmother is not the result of obedience to elders, but stems from her personality and charisma. The grandmother is a woman who bell hooks admires the most.

The illiterate grandmother is famous for the different stories she tells her granddaughter, especially about her female ancestors. In a way, she resembles the Wild Woman, the archetypal *La Que Sabe* (She Who Knows), a woman who knows everything about femininity because she created the first woman out of the wrinkle on her foot (Estés 1992). As Clarissa Pinkola Estés writes, the Wild Woman is as eternal as time itself; she lives in the female consciousness and has the power to transform and revive. She represents activity, wisdom, natural instincts, that is, the deepest, most valuable mental traits associated with femininity. These virtues and qualities are represented by Saru, the grandmother in *Bone Black*. "She tells me that a person cannot feel right in their heart if they have denied parts of their ancestral past, that this not feeling right in the heart is the cause of much pain" (bell hooks 1996: 49). Listening to grandmother's stories is a lesson in valuing the past as well as the protagonist's own family history. By listening to these stories, bell hooks becomes part of them and is taught to transmit them further as well.

The author is taught the art of storytelling while learning the art of making quilts. Sewing the quilt, piecing different blocks of material together, was a typically female activity, especially popular among Black women. It was an opportunity for them to spend time in a female circle, and share stories among each other. In this regard, making a quilt could be a way to deepen bonds between women, in particular, between a mother and a daughter. However, bell hooks identifies the act of making

a quilt not with the mother, but with the grandmother. The grandmother is the woman who introduces her into the tradition of making quilts.

(B)ell hooks compares making quilts with the art of storytelling. Each piece of cloth used for the quilt comes from a different source, therefore representing a different story. It is similar to an autobiography; while the quilt consists of many small pieces of cloth, an autobiography consists of small, often fragmentary memories collected together. Another interesting metaphor for women's storytelling is weaving, as described by Nancy K. Miller (1988). Inspired by Roland Barthes' concept of textuality (text as fabric), Miller constructs her concept of female storytelling, which she calls arachnologies, with reference to the Arachne myth. For bell hooks, it is her grandmother who embodies female artistry in its practical, real dimension. She can tell the stories through quilt sewing. The relationship with the grandmother is a special bond based on a shared sense of artistry, independence of thinking, and pride of being a part of Black history and culture. In contrast to the relationship with the mother, for bell hooks the bond with the grandmother is more spiritual than emotional; it is based on her grandmother's authority as a "free spirit," an independent woman. The grandmother's position in the family and community is of great importance here. She is not dependent on her husband (man) in the sense of marital dependence. Therefore, she is a role model, a woman bell hooks admires the most.

Family stories and different models of womanhood

Family stories that bell hooks has been told as a child are built on a moral message. They are about the values of a particular group and thus contain not only knowledge about what is good and worth remembering, but also what can be described as a "series of humiliating experiences" (Delcroix, Lagier 2014: 26). According to Catherine Delcroix, in the course of intergenerational and intragenerational transmission, the personal-subjective resources are created. These include moral strength, courage, resilience, patience, reflexivity, imagination, and communicative skills, resources that are developed out of an intense reflexive process on one's own biographical experiences (Delcroix 2000, 2009). Parents and grandparents by telling children stories about their family, including their own biographical experiences, at the same time provide them with the various strategies on how to use these personal resources in their life. Delcroix and Lagier (2014: 26) state that, "Family history, as told by parents to children, is a tool, conveying not only information about the past and tradition, but also about the need for change." Therefore, it is not just telling family stories but also an educational strategy by which parents and grandparents prepare children to face the risk of discrimination, for example, racism, classism, and sexism.

The family of bell hooks is of African-American origin, living in a poor neighborhood in Hopkinsville. The elderly are illiterate or semi-illiterate, like her beloved grandmother. They share a history of slavery. Her grandparents worked as house servants for white middle-class Americans. Their memories of the difficult expe-

riences related to racial discrimination are an integral part of their biography and family history. Therefore, they are also an important part of bell hooks' biography. One of her memories concerns her maternal grandfather. One day he suffered burns while cleaning up the garbage cans of his white employer, who, on seeing him burning, did not do anything to help him but instead called his family to ask them to intervene. This incident proved to bell hooks the importance of her family ties, her readiness to save her grandfather's life, and the white people's indifference to the suffering of Black people.

Difficult experiences, particularly related to racism, are rarely discussed in the family. They constitute a silent part of the intergenerational and intra-family transmission – they concern painful, humiliating events in life, often incomprehensible, because they are based on social injustice and racial discrimination; nota bene, in her writings bell hooks uses the term 'white supremacy,' considering it as more descriptive than 'racism' to characterize the reality of race relations in America (bell hooks 1995: 184–195).

The changing politics of race relations in the 1960s (segregation and desegregation of schools) deeply influenced both the possibilities granted to bell hooks, as well as the barriers she encountered at school and later at the university. The most important changes and formative experiences for bell hooks occurred during the school period. She attended the segregated school until her sophomore year of high school. Then, from the age of sixteen, going to school required the escort of the National Guard. She learned that "[…] the world is more a home for white folks than it is for anyone else, that Black people who most resemble white folks will better in that world" (1996: 31). Discussing the biography of bell hooks, Maria Del Guadalupe Davidson and George Yancy (2009: 2) claim that, "She and other black children were racialized by white society in ways that had the sole purpose of making them feel inferior, of making them internalize themselves as a problem." On the other hand, Claire Cooke (2012) states that, "Race and fear had been closely linked during hooks' childhood," and being Black meant isolation for bell hooks, since her experiences were not a subject to discuss at home. (B)ell hooks describes how the experience of racial discrimination and going to school (on foot) was rationalized by her father:

> 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 cried (bell hooks 1996: 5).

The humiliating experiences were not articulated openly. Being silent or avoiding speaking about painful experiences does not mean, however, that they

disappeared from their memories and their lives. Silence about one's own history does not mean that there is no history. Parents' silence about the family history is of great significance in the process of raising children: instead of a strategy of dealing with difficult experiences, children receive a non-verbal message about powerlessness. This knowledge does not enable them to change the way of thinking about themselves: from a powerless victim to someone who has a sense of control over his/her own memory.

(B)ell hooks confesses that secrecy and silence were central issues at home. Moreover, "Secrecy about family, about what went on in the domestic household was a bond between us" (bell hooks 1989: 156). However, she felt the need to tell her story, a story about pain, the slave past of her grandparents, and her female ancestors. By telling her family history, she reflects on her own past. For her storytelling brings relief and emancipation. It is a way to reconstruct the past, and ultimately also to reconstruct herself:

> The longing to tell one's story and the process of telling is symbolically a gesture of longing to recover the past in such a way that one experiences both a sense of reunion and a sense of release. It was the joy of reunion to find again that aspect of self and experience that may no longer be an actual part of one's life but is a living memory shaping and informing the present. Autobiographical writing was a way for me to evoke the particular experiences of growing up southern and black in segregated communities. It was a way to recapture the richness of southern black culture (bell hooks 1989: 158).

(B)ell hooks knows that her childhood memories are unique because that world no longer exists. The melancholic mood of her childhood memories is enhanced by the story of the community she was part of as a child. It is a community of people telling and listening to Black folks stories.

The fundamental value of the stories told by bell hooks centers around family ties. Raised in the cult of the family, bell hooks experiences ambivalent emotions when she decides to leave her family home and study in California. Her intellectual ambitions made her go to California to study at Stanford University. However, family and African-American origin became the core theme of her books, including *Bone Black,* the autobiographical story of her Black girlhood.

After leaving for college, bell hooks felt guilty about moving away from her family. This distance is not only spatial, but also emotional. She wants to be loyal to her family and community, but at the same time she wants to pursue her intellectual plans and dreams of becoming a poet and intellectual. Her loyalty to family and African-American community becomes her identification mark as a writer; she defines herself as a Black woman from a working-class family living in a small rural community in Kentucky. This identification with her group of origin seems to symbolically and emotionally tie her with her family and community even despite the spatial separation.

The use of the pen name "bell hooks" can be seen as a kind of gesture indicating a strong bond with the family. As a girl she had the opportunity to experience and learn two completely different models of womanhood implemented by her mother and her grandmother. They have an impact on her vision of her own future; however, due to their different character, they affect bell hooks' development in different ways. She did not want to repeat her mother's life scenario, seeing herself more as the inheritor of her grandmother's legacy, as well as her ancestors. Listening to the stories of her grandmother, she learnt about her great-grandmother, Bell Blair Hooks. From this story, she gains a sense of pride: "I come from a long line of hot and courageous rural women who know what they must do in this world" (1996: 93). It was an important lesson of different visions of womanhood.

The pen name "bell hooks" comes from her great-grandmother's name. Choosing it is a gesture of respect for her ancestors, for the women who have influenced her life story. Just as her grand-grandmother, bell hooks wants to speak in her own voice. She describes her great-grandmother as a proud woman, known for her rebellious character. To distinguish herself from her, she decided to write her pen name using small letters:"bell hooks":

> One of the many reasons I chose to write using the pseudonym bell hooks, a family name […] was to construct a writer-identity that would challenge and subdue all impulses leading me away from speech into silence. […] I must be kin to bell hooks – a sharp-tongued woman, a woman who spoke her mind, a woman who was not afraid to talk back. I claimed this legacy of defiance, of will, of courage, affirming my link to female ancestors who were bold and daring in their speech. […] bell hooks as I discovered, claimed, and invented her was my ally, my support (bell hooks 1989: 9).

The intergenerational transmission in the context of the life story

According to Daniel Bertaux, every narrative and life story provides information on different aspects on various levels: that of the subject's interiority (fr. *niveau subjectif*, resulting from the process of socialization and first experiences), that of long-term relationships with parents and relatives (interpersonal networks), and finally, that of socio-structural relationships such as hierarchical relations between positions and power relations (Bertaux 2016: 74).

This division into three levels helps to locate specific elements contained in one's life story. As Bertaux (2016) writes, we can perceive them as descriptions of different states: at each moment certain physical and psychological states of the subject correspond to their life narrative, their "personality," but also to a certain state of strong intersubjective relations, as well as their social situation (for instance, employment, resources, housing, assets, or family status). Anything that materially alters at least one of these three states is an event; and vice versa, any event in the biographical journey modifies at least one of the states.

The process of transformation takes place not only at the *niveau subjectif*. According to Bertaux, the most intimate movements of the mind, such as falling in love, religious conversion, or the decision to commit suicide, cannot be understood without considering the strong interpersonal relationships of the individual at the moment (Bertaux 2016: 75). Bertaux emphasizes the role of the family environment and its impact on individual life paths of family members. He also draws attention to various types of relationships and family ties, since members of the same family group are bound together not only by deep emotional and psychological ties, but also by mutual moral obligations.

The autobiography of bell hooks contains all three levels mentioned by Bertaux. These levels are a source of knowledge not only about what the author thinks of her life, but also about 'what has been done to her' and how she reacted to it. The first dimension of her life story reveals information about her childhood and adolescent experiences. These are mainly experiences of domestic violence, a child's loneliness, and racism (e.g., devaluing her skills, undermining her intellectual abilities because of her origin). These are the experiences that shape her vision of womanhood, as well as her vision of what her future life should look like (influencing her decision to study at college and become a poet). From her girlhood story it is possible to learn about the dreams and hopes she decides to pursue as a young woman.

(B)ell hooks's memories reveal family history as well as the process of family bonds transformation through the years. While the relationship with her mother is emotionally intense and complicated, it is subject to changing and ambivalent emotions (from love to anger), the relationship with her father appears to be the opposite. He is emotionally distant and peculiar. The father is presented as a negative figure (he is aggressive, violent and he does not respect his wife and children). The author admits that she lost respect for him already in her childhood years. Through time, their relationship becomes more about tolerating each other. Even as an adult, she is angry with her father and cannot understand his attitude towards her mother and family. In this regard, *Bone Black* can be read as a critical portrayal of patriarchal society, with her father as a face of it. The book is also a critique of white supremacy, class and power relations in American society. This type of information represents the level of socio-structural relationships in the history of life. It reveals the social position of the author in terms of her origin, gender, and economic status, as well as possible areas of conflicts resulting from this location and possible refusal to follow the (stereotypical) behavioral norms and social expectations related to "the collective semantics (beliefs, values, representations, internalized norms, shared meanings, etc.) of an entire society" (Bertaux 2016: 75). However, the story is much more complicated. *Bone Black* shows that learning about one's past (family history as well as history of one's community or group of origin) can be both a source of pain – a "series of humiliating experiences" – related to knowledge about a family's slave past, but also a source of personal strength, including the consciousness of the oppressed that can become a tool of political

change, "As comrades in struggle writing about the effort to end racial domination in South Africa put it in the Freedom Charter: 'Our struggle is also a struggle of memory against forgetting'" (bell hooks 1989: 4).

Conclusion

The aim of this essay was to discuss the intergenerational transmission of family stories and family relationships in the context of the process of becoming a woman. The example that I chose to analyze is the autobiography of bell hooks entitled *Bone Black*. I chose this book because it illustrates how the intersection of race and gender plays a role in a particular life story and thus contributes to our understanding of Black girlhood. The author of *Bone Black* exposes and reveals "the inner life of a girl inventing herself—creating the foundation of selfhood and identity that will ultimately lead to the fulfillment of her true destiny—becoming a writer" (1996: xi). Through her story, she exemplifies the importance of intergenerational transmission in the form of family stories in the process of her becoming 'bell hooks.'

(B)ell hooks' autobiography shows the emancipatory potential deriving from the transmission of family history. The stories about her maternal great-grandmother impressed her so much that she decided to follow this proud Black woman, Bell Blair Hooks, in her rebellious way of being. The adoption of the pen name "bell hooks" is a tribute to all female ancestors in her family, and at the same time can be seen as a creative response to her own individual past.

Through the act of sharing the story of her girlhood years, bell hooks transforms her family history so that it is still kept alive and significant both on a personal and collective level – she is still a part of both her family and community, and at the same time she speaks in her own voice with which she is ultimately shaping her own identity as a feminist and Black woman.

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