bell hooks and Being a Southern Black Woman Intellectual: A Paper in Vignettes[*]

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In this essay, I explore the meaning of place and geography as a Southern black woman philosopher. My reflections on these topics are informed by the work of bell hooks, a native Kentuckian who moved to the North and then back again to the South. I explore how bell hooks has helped me reconcile the racist history of the South with how I see myself today.

Key words: bell hooks; black feminism; American South; Southernness; strategies of resistance

1 Introduction

Ahmaud Arbery. Kendrick Johnson. Sandra Bland. Trayvon Martin. Alton Sterling. Breona Taylor. All Southern black people. When I left the South in 2018, I vowed never to return to live. Although I love the South, and love being close to family, I felt that my aspirations and imagination regarding who I was had outgrown the place. What bell hooks says about her homeplace resonates.

> I did not imagine myself returning to live in Kentucky. Time and time again I visited and felt that so little had changed. As a grown woman I felt that there was even less room for me here than when I was [a] child. Unchanged racism seemed to have grown more deeply entrenched. Plantation culture seemed to still be the norm. Narrow irrational fundamentalist religious thought continued to prevail. Neat justifications for domination culture were the order of the day.[1]

Although USA as a country has its own problems when it comes to legalizing hate and discrimination, I was concerned about living in a place that, given its history of vigilante-style terrorism against folks like myself. I was worried that such terrorism might now have legal backing.

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In recent years, I've found myself being drawn back to hooks. A grown woman now, I find myself on a new life journey that has to do in part with understanding whether and how my background and my current space support or hinder my creativity. hooks's thoughts about how being a Southern black woman informs her work is now an important part of how I now understand myself. I am originally from the South, but spent some time living up North for graduate school and also a job. I wanted to come back home. Although I was very fortunate to land a good job back home, I was in some turmoil about my previous vow in 2018 to never return. After I made the decision to come back, I started to reflect on how I truly felt about the land of my birth.

The South is my muse. Although I loved many aspects of being up North, I felt that something was missing. I needed to be in community with the parts of myself that informed my work and my life. Those parts of myself were in the people, traditions, language and culture of Southern black people. They were not there with me up North. My soul and my body needed to go back home to the land where I was from. In 2023, I was fortunate to land a job in the South. But before going back home, I needed to think about how I would navigate the space as the Jameliah who'd also lived in other places. With these concerns in mind, I sought bell hooks's guidance. I wanted to know what to do when you are from a place that you both love and loathe. I wanted to see a model of how to feel about the South when you are the very antithesis of the Southern black woman stereotype. I wanted to know whether people like myself are ever able to find peace in their hearts when they move back home. This paper captures some of those reflections, reflections on what bell hooks taught me about being a Southern black woman intellectual.

2 bell hooks

bell hooks was born in Hopkinsville, Kentucky, in 1952, and was given the name Gloria Jean Watkins. She chose for herself the pen name bell hooks which is derived from the name of her maternal great-grandmother, Bell Blair Hooks.[2] The proper spelling of hooks's name requires that it is also spelled in all lowercase. hooks argues that the decision to spell her name that way is an attempt to push aside the ego[3], to "shift the attention from her identity to her ideas."[4]

hooks received degrees in English from Stanford University, University of Wisconsin-Madison, and University of California-Santa Cruz. She also held faculty positions at Yale University, Oberlin College, and the City College of New York.[5] In 2004, hooks became a faculty member at Berea College in her home state of Kentucky. In 2015 while at Berea, hooks also founded the bell hooks Institute which holds her papers, letters and other artifacts.[6] hooks is a prolific writer, having written over forty books which focus on a myriad of issues and topics such as film, popular culture, race, feminism, pedagogy, masculinity, and writing. In addition to these books of essays, she has also written books of books of poetry, self-help, and memoirs. Her other accolades include being named as one of the "100 Women of the Year" in 2020 by *Time* magazine.[7]

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For black feminist philosophers, one cannot say that they know black feminist theory without reading bell hooks. Arguably, she is one of the most important intellectual voices for this study area.[8] At the age of nineteen, hooks drafted one of the earliest books on black feminist history and thought which was later published as *Aint' I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (1981). As an undergraduate, I was led to bell hooks's writing because of my burgeoning interest in black feminism. I cannot remember exactly when I bought my first book of hers, but I believe that it was in 2007. Back then, whenever I'd buy a book, I would write the year that I acquired the book in its front cover. In my current bell hooks collection, I notice that in the cover of one of her books, I'd written the year 2007. That book is titled *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (1984). Other books that I've collected since then on this topic include *Feminism is for Everybody: Passionate Politics* (2000) and *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black* (1989).

hooks died on December 15, 2021. After her death, news outlets such as the *New York Times* described her as a "pathbreaking black feminist" (Risen 2021). A New Yorker writer describes her work as "revolutionary" (Hsu 2021). hooks's writing brings the thought of black women from many walks of life to the fore, but her perspective is especially important because of her focus on class. hooks's writing, due to her style, makes her work accessible and therefore easy to resonate with readers. Speaking anecdotally, hooks's writing voice feels like it is written for you. Her style feels intimate but not intrusive, accessible but intellectually challenging. She is also a master at brevity. A book by hooks can be read essay by essay which are themselves in digestible lengths, giving one time to savor each thought.

Inspired by hooks, I offer the rest of this essay in vignettes which are fragments of my thoughts about home and place. I admit that none of these ideas that I have are fully worked out. I am not sure that they will ever be. hooks helps me think more carefully about this area of my life, and, for me, the vulnerability that she demonstrates in her writing is an approach that I aim to emulate here. My hope is that readers are open to thinking through this topic with me as I rely on bell hooks's guidance. Vignette one is where I start with my initial thoughts about home, as I discuss the reservations that I had about moving back to the South. In Vignette two, I discuss the tension that bell hooks had about moving back to the South that also resonates with me. In Vignette three, I refer to bell hooks and the ways in which she reframed the notion of home such that it became her superpower.

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3 Vignette 1

Home for me is the South. I was born and raised in the beautiful yet flawed state of Georgia. I am a true Georgia peach. Both sides of my family, stretching back to my ancestors, are from the state. After my undergraduate years, which I spent in my hometown of Augusta-Richmond County, Georgia, I left the South to attend graduate school in Pennsylvania. After completing school, I came back to Georgia to take my first job as an assistant professor—a position I stayed in for four years. I then left again to return to live in the North, first in Massachusetts and then briefly again in Pennsylvania before moving to Tennessee last year. I love the South. Sunsets look more golden there. Being able to do "the nod" to other black faces that understand makes me feel safe and comfortable. There is nothing that makes a Southern girl happier than being able to go to the grocery store and pick up a healthy, luscious bunch of collard greens to cook on a Sunday afternoon. My scholarly work also craved the South. My new projects on black feminist theory needed to be cultivated in the context of black women's culture, which was hard to find in the northern places where I had lived.

Before moving back to the South, I got questions about whether I was comfortable going back there. Perhaps the most pointed comment was simply "Are you ready for the South?" In my head, I played the stanza "I ain't never scared!," which is a line from the song "Never Scared" (2003) sung by my Georgia brother from the ATL, Bone Crusher. But I must admit that sometimes I am scared. I know the South. I am afraid sometimes when my black husband leaves home that he may not come back. I am afraid of what might happen if I look the wrong white person in the eye (as I have become so very accustomed to the ways of being in the North). I am afraid of what might happen if I accidentally stop in a sundown town in Tennessee (as I am still learning the state). But I try to remember that the South is my place, not just the place that I came from, but the place that I call mine now.

The South is still itself with all of its beauty and all of its terror. And I have not come back home in quite the same way I did before. Having lived away from the South for so many years, I had grown accustomed to, and even came to prefer, some of the habits that I *had* to develop while away. For example, I do not lower my eyes anymore when I talk to white people. I do not allow white people to speak over me. I expect people to do things in a timely fashion. I walk into my favorite beauty boutiques like L'Occitane with my head held high as I buy what I like. Even as I decided to move back to the South, I knew that refusing to change my new habits to match the norms of Southern black folk would come with consequences. I knew that coming back to live in the South with these habits would create a barrier to my being fully accepted and understood in the space. I knew that I would be perceived as an oddity, at arms' length from the Southern culture and place to which I so wanted to return. I wondered how I could be the Jameliah who grew up in the South and knows how problematic the place is while also being the Jameliah who strives to be true to herself—a self that paradoxically came to fruition while I was living "up North." This Jameliah is coming back to live in this complicated place called the South.

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4 Vignette 2

As a Southern black woman intellectual, I sometimes feel that I am living in a tripartite tension. The part of me that is a Southern black woman feels incompatible with the part of me that is a professional intellectual, and these parts, taken together, feel incompatible with my living in the South. As a child of the South, I feel the tension that leads some of us to move away from our birthplace. In *Belonging: A Culture of Place* (2009), hooks writes that in the state of Kentucky, her birthplace, the "racist aspect of the confederate past was glorified, a world that for the most part attempted to obscure and erase the history of black Kentuckians" (hooks 2009: 11). hooks, who grew up in the Appalachian part of the state, notes that while living there as a child, she experienced racial integration because the "mountain white folks" did "not show overt racism." She had a very different experience when she moved away from her original home, however. She states,

> Our move away from that culture into the mainstream world and its values meant that it was white supremacy which shaped and informed the nature of our lives once we were no longer living in the hills. It was this legacy of racial threat and hate that engendered in me the desire to leave Kentucky and to not return (hooks 2009: 11).

But one thing that those of us who are from the South realize very quickly after moving away is that although it may present differently in different places, racism is still present in the world. Here I find hooks's description of the "shape shifting nature of white supremacy" very fitting (hooks 2009: 12). For hooks, this means that racism has "myriad faces" which means that it is pervasive throughout society, albeit in different ways.

Racism is indeed just racism, but the experience of the black person in America is compounded by their Southernness, yielding a peculiar experience of racism shaped by both identities. hooks's experience in college concretizes this notion. hooks writes, "During my first year at Stanford University, I felt for the first time the way in which geographical origins could separate citizens of the same nation. I did not feel a sense of belonging at Stanford University, I constantly felt like an unwanted outsider" (hooks 2009: 12). Over time, she found herself changing her Kentuckian ways to fit in. For example, she writes about changing how she spoke in order,

> "to keep the sounds and cadences of Kentucky secret, an intimate voice to be heard only by folks who could understand. Not speaking in the tongue of my ancestors was a way to silence ridicule about Kentucky. It was a way to avoid being subjugated by the geographical hierarchies around me which deemed my native place country, backwards, a place outside time" (hooks 2009: 14).

I understand her statement and have myself made similar choices. Having Southern ways means that your culture and place are visible on the body. When you are away from home, in an effort to avoid becoming a target and to preserve the dignity of your homeplace, you change.

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hooks writes that this feeling of having to change herself for the world began to cause a "split in [her] mind and heart," making her feel as though she was broken into two. She writes, "At heart I saw myself as a country girl, an eccentric product of the sense and sensibility of the Kentucky backwoods and yet the life I lived was one where different ethics, values, and beliefs ruled the day. My life away from Kentucky was full of contradictions" (hooks 2009: 15). The pain that was caused by this psychological fracturing "caused a breaking down of the spirit," and the only way she was able to heal was by "remembering myself, taking the bits and pieces of my life and putting them together again. In remembering my childhood and writing about my early life I was mapping the territory, discovering myself and finding homeplace—seeing clearly that Kentucky was my fate" (hooks 2009: 15).

5 Vignette 3

hooks' perspective has helped me think more about one aspect of being a Southern black woman who has returned home—and that is regarding how to adjudicate the history and the present of the South which has a particular brand of racism, with the concern about how to address it. hooks writes:

> Oftentimes black folks who have left southern roots have symbolically run away to escape the everyday racism that restricts, limits, and confines, a racism that seems somehow worse than the racism one encounters elsewhere because it is intimate terrorism imposed not by strangers but by those with whom one is most familiar (hooks 2009: 219).

In my home state of Georgia, about fifty percent of the state is white. What this suggests is that people of color and white people most likely encounter one another regularly, which also suggests that there, one cannot say that one has had no experience dealing with a person of another race. I would argue then, that discrimination in this case is not due to ignorance about a person of another race, but is rather based upon a deliberate choice.

During a recent trip back to my home city, I went into a restaurant downtown. Downtown Augusta is being gentrified. Now, there are shops and other places to dine there that I would have had the regular experience of visiting when I lived up North, but, as a child, I would have never imagined stepping into these places if they were around. This particular night, I chose to go to a restaurant that a friend had taken me to before. The ambiance is like that of a lounge complete with dark colored drapes which separated the tables. The pride of the restaurant is its "handcrafted" Neapolitan style pizza and drinks. As an adult, living in the North, I'd gone to numerous restaurants like this before, and never felt uncomfortable being there. But tonight, I noticed that I was being stared at from the moment I entered to the time that I left. As a black Southerner, you know *that*

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stare when you are not supposed to be in an establishment. This experience reminded me of the tension that I feel as a black woman returning home.

In addition to hooks, another writer's work on the South has also helped me think through the tension that a black person may feel upon returning home. Award winning writer Jesmyn Ward is a Southern black woman intellectual from Mississippi. Ward was the first black woman (also, the first woman and first black American) to receive two National Book Awards: one for her book *Salvage the Bones* (2011) and another for *Sing, Unburied, Sing* (2017).[9] She is also the recipient of a MacArthur Fellows "Genius Grant" (2017).[10] Ward is a professor of creative writing at Tulane University in Louisiana and currently lives in Mississippi. Like me, she was educated in a place away from home, "up North," as some of us say back home. She graduated with her MFA from the University of Michigan and held a Stegner Fellowship for two years at Stanford University.[11]

One piece of Ward's that has long resonated with me is a 2018 essay that she wrote for *Time*'s "The South Issue." In this essay, I will refer to the online version of Ward's piece, which is titled "My True South: Why I Decided to Return Home." The essay begins with Ward discussing how she would be questioned about why she, a "successful black woman," would want to go back to a state that "looms large in the public's imagination for its racist depredations, and rightfully so."[12] Her reflections on her home state touch upon her and her family's experiences of racism and discrimination in Mississippi. Ward relates how her nephew was falsely accused of selling drugs at school and was strip-searched; how her sister heard a friend's neighbor use the "n-word," gesturing in her direction; and how she herself was asked whether an item was on sale at a store as if she were a sales clerk when she was obviously shopping as well (Ward 2018). These and other scenarios led Ward to experience great physical and psychological stress. She writes,

> Living in the American South for generations, my family has collected so many accounts of racial terror, passed down over the decades. I carry every slur, every slight, every violent malign within me; they have become part of me, accreted in me year after year to settle in me and express themselves in my body: vascular inflammation, migraine headaches, diabetes, giving birth to both of my children prematurely (Ward 2018).

But Ward continues by noting that this "particularly Southern strain of this illness" is an "American disease" (Ward 2018). I take her to mean that the sort of racism and discrimination that she and her family suffer is not particular to Mississippi, but is rather an experience that can be had anywhere, especially in the USA. Imani Perry (2022), another Southern black woman intellectual who hails from Alabama, puts it this way:

> The consequence of the projection of national sins, and specifically racism, onto one region is a mis-narration of history and American identity. The consequence of truncating the South and relegating it to a backwards corner is a misapprehension of its power in American history. Paying attention to the South—its past, its dance, its present, its threatening future, and most of all how it moves the rest of the country about—allows us to understand much more about

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> our nation, and about how our people, land, and commerce work in relation to one another, often cruelly, and about how our tastes and ways flow from our habits (Perry 2022: xix).[13]

That is, the story of the South is the story of America. I might argue that it is also the story of world. What I mean is that the attitudes and behaviors of discrimination and hate—attitudes supported by the state—are not just Southern problems. As Southern black woman intellectuals, we begin to realize this fact in short order after moving away. For hooks, being able to reflect upon her Southern black womanness allowed her to exist more fully in the duality of her existence: a woman from a place where there is great discrimination and racism, but a woman who finds in that same place the resources that lead to resistance. She writes,

> Making the connections between geographical location and psychological states of being was useful for me. It empowered me to recognize the serious dysfunctional aspect of the southern world I was raised in, the ways internalized racism affected our emotional intelligence, our emotional life and yet it also revealed the positive aspects of my upbringing, the strategies of resistance that were life enhancing (hooks 2009: 19).

Although hooks does not give clear examples of strategies of resistance, she does describe such strategies as the result of the emergence of a "sub-culture based on oppositional values"—that is, values that are different from those based on white supremacy. She writes that, "Growing up, renegade black and white folks who perceived the backwoods, the natural environment, to be a space away from manmade constructions, from dominator culture, were able to create unique habits of thinking and being that were in resistance to the status quo" (hooks 2009: 19). She describes these values as "free-thinking and non-conformist" which were, in turn, a "threat to imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy" (hooks 2009: 20). I argue that these Appalachian values, at least as hooks describes them, when shared with the mainstream world, as hooks did in her writing, are at least one of the reasons why there is value in the *Southern* black woman intellectual experience.

In this very moment, I do not claim to fully comprehend the importance of that experience. But what bell hooks has made me realize is that these parts of myself—my Southernness, womanness, and intellectualness—are not inherently in conflict. I have learned from her that inhabiting all three of these identities simultaneously, uniquely informs my scholarly work. In reflecting more on this, I started thinking about that spark that has made Southern black women who they are. The fact that the Southern black woman intellectual exists and that she does so boldly attests to the power of place—a place that is able to create diamonds despite itself. I think here of Southern black women intellectuals like Angela Y. Davis, from Birmingham, Alabama; Alice Walker from Eatonton, Georgia; and my great-grandmother Inetha Hammonds from Florida, who worked as a high school counselor and earned her master's degree. Institutions such as Spelman College in Georgia and Bennett College in North Carolina have been educating black women since the nineteenth century. Southern black women intellectuals write, think, and speak *despite* their experience as Southern black women and *because of* their experience as Southern black women. hooks has taught me to be proud of this legacy and to find power in my home place.

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While this paper falls short in the way of resolving all of the questions that we may have about the Southern black woman intellectual, I am grateful for what I have learned from bell hooks about what inhabiting such a complex identity means. She has taught me to be proud of where I am from, and to be proud of where I am now. My hope is that we learn from bell hooks to do our intellectual work from a place that honors our roots.

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2 bell hooks, *Talking Back, Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black* (Boston: South End Press, 1989), 160.

3 bell hooks, *The Last Interview, and Other Conversations* (Brooklyn: Melville House Publishing, 2023), 106.

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[13] Imani Perry, *South to America: A Journey below the Mason-Dixon to Understand the Soul of a Nation*, New York: Ecco, 2022.

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