

# “Deep Psychic Wounds”: bell hooks’ Healing Methods for African American Communities

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## Abstract

bell hooks was a leader in the literary world who was unashamed in expressing her affection for the upliftment of African Americans in the United States. Majority of her works focus on the idea of white supremacy and how it has caused impoverishment and degradation among black communities. People within black communities suffer from low self-esteem, physical and mental health issues due to the racism, sexism and class oppressions that have become perpetual fixtures within society. Therefore, hooks’ literature insist that it is important for African Americans to find methods towards overcoming their trauma to end their pain and feelings of inadequacy. A collection of six books is utilized to highlight the advice that hooks provides for African Americans who are distressed and need to recover from the long-term effects of systematic racism and sexism. She offers anecdotes to help black people realize that it is necessary to take an active role in healing from subjugation in order to live a more prosperous life. This bibliographic essay demonstrates that self-reflection and dismantling white supremacy ideals in society is essential in the process of healing and improving mental health within the African American community.

## Keywords

bell hooks, Trauma, Healing Through Community, African American Community, Mental Health

## 1. Introduction

In recent years, more attention has been given to mental health concerns among African Americans. Many medical professionals have conducted studies that show a significant rise in mental health incidents in the black community. For instance, in 2020, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS)

released a study that informed Congress that suicide rates had increased and were higher among black youth than white youth in the United States (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2020a). The risk factors associated with higher suicide rates among black youth were children who lived at a low socioeconomic status, in impoverished conditions and experienced racial/ethnic discrimination. What's more, the Center for Disease Control reported that black females, grades 9 - 12, were 60 percent more likely to attempt suicide in 2019, as compared to non-Hispanic white females of the same age. Thus, African American youth are struggling to manage their mental health issues in a positive manner that does not lead to suicide or suicidal thoughts (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2020b).

Along with mental health issues, the African American community is also dealing with their own distrust of the medical system. An article published by *Psychol Trauma* mentions the behavior of African Americans during the coronavirus pandemic. The article states, "African-Americans are less likely than Whites to have ongoing relationships with mental health providers; rather, they are more likely to engage with the mental health care system through emergency departments and primary care visits," (Sneed, Key, Bailey, & Johnson-Lawrence, 2020). African Americans' distrust of the medical system has a history in America that originates from slavery and still continues today. They have endured various discriminations ranging from stolen human cells, maltreatment, and purposeful misdiagnoses, therefore, causing many African Americans to seek medical attention when there is an emergency rather than when enduring a minor episode (Williams, Rosen, & Kanter, 2019).

For these reasons, it is vital to provide African Americans with alternative solutions to assist in improving their mental health and wellness in the United States. African Americans must take control of improving their mental health in the United States before further harm comes to their community. To present alternative methods to healing from mental health concerns, a collection of bell hooks' books is utilized to highlight the advice that she provides for African Americans who are distressed and need to recovery from the long-term effects of systematic racism and sexism. She offers anecdotes to help black people realize that it is necessary to take an active role in healing from subjugation in order to live a more prosperous life. This bibliographic essay delineates that self-reformation and dismantling white supremacy ideals in society is essential in the process of healing and improving mental health within the African American community.

Alongside bell hooks' books, other scholars and professionals have provided solutions to African Americans' mental health concerns. Monnica T. Williams Daniel C. Rosen, and Jonathan W. Kanter's *Eliminating Race-Based Mental Health Disparities: Promoting Equity and Culturally Responsive Care Across Settings* conducted research studies to address the disparities among African Americans in the United States (Williams, Rosen, & Kanter, 2019). Through

their research, these psychologists uncovered the hardships and discriminatory practices that keep African Americans from obtaining adequate health care. Further, these medical professionals provided strategies for clinicians to utilize in order to eliminate the disparities that African Americans experience.

This bibliographic essay's purpose is to address the African Americans and propose methods that will help their community to deal with mental health concerns before they are in dire straits. Thus, *Eliminating Race-Based Mental Health Disparities: Promoting Equity and Culturally Responsive Care Across Settings* does the opposite by not addressing African Americans, but rather speaks to clinicians who are likely to provide medical care to African Americans. The psychologists' work is a helpful aide towards educating medical professionals on how they can present better health care practices for African Americans to eliminate health disparities among their community (Williams, Rosen, & Kanter, 2019).

Resmaa Menakem's *My Grandmother's Hands: Racialized Trauma and the Pathway to Mending Our Hearts and Bodies* highlights the white supremacy ideals that exist in the United States and how they have negatively impacted American society (Menakem, 2017). Menakem writes that both white and black people have suffered a great amount of distress from the idea that white people are hereditarily superior. She insists that white supremacy thoughts must be eradicated from society so that those thoughts do not affect people in a manner that causes traumatic harm to their overall physical health.

The difference between our scholarship is that this bibliographic essay focuses on just the experience of African Americans in the United States and no other ethnicity. The focus of the essay is to ensure that African Americans are taking the necessary precautions to confront mental health issues when they arrive. Although this essay does tackle the issue of white supremacy ideal affecting the black community, it singularly addresses mental health among the African American community and not other effects that white supremacy thought has had on the body. In recent times, mental health and suicide prevention are among the biggest concerns for the black community, thus it should be mentioned exclusively (Menakem, 2017).

Apart from bell hooks, Toni Morrison is another prominent literary voice among the genre of African American literature. Her novels, *The Bluest Eyes* and *Sula* both address mental health issues among African Americans (Morrison, 1970; Morrison, 1973). The main character, Pecola, in *The Bluest Eyes* exposes the poor mental health that can develop from the effects of white supremacy ideals as she is obsessed with changing her eyes from brown to blue in order to be beautiful. In Morrison's work, it is apparent that Pecola had a mental breakdown or psychonic episode where she was no longer in touch with reality and only saw what she wanted to see. In *Sula*, Morrison highlights how African American soldiers suffered mental health issues once returning from war and how they were neglected by the health care system. Her novel shed light on the

disparities that African American veterans faced in the health care system and how that negatively impacted the black community overall. Both novels provide an in-depth sentimental description of the plight of African Americans who have mental health issues.

Although both hooks and Morrison are African American literary writers, this collection of essays focuses more on hooks' published work that highlights her lived experiences. She has researched and written about the African American experience for many decades and provided books that were meant to uplift African Americans and help them improve their own lives. Her advocacy for improving mental health among the black community is revealed among the six books that are mentioned in this bibliographic essay (Morrison, 1970; Morrison, 1973).

## 2. Ending Thoughts of Domination

As a feminist and civil rights activist, bell hooks was a leader in the literary world who was unashamed in expressing her affection for the upliftment of African Americans in the United States. hooks studied white supremacy thoughts and how the adoption of those ideas caused impoverishment and degradation among black communities. When acknowledging issues concerning African Americans' mental health, she writes, "It is by now common knowledge that the trauma of white supremacy and ongoing racist assault leaves deep psychic wounds," (hooks, 2001). People within black communities suffer from low self-esteem, physical and mental health issues due to the racism, sexism and class oppressions that have become perpetual fixtures within society. Therefore, hooks' literature insists that it is important for African Americans to find methods towards overcoming their trauma to end their pain and feelings of inadequacy.

For instance, in her book entitled, *Writing Beyond Race*, hooks acknowledges that most people have historically written about class, gender and race in ways that reinforce ideas of domination (hooks, 2013). The most common of those ideas of domination are racism and white supremacy. She insists that racism and white supremacist thoughts are embedded in the subconscious of American society. For decades, African Americans endured racial stereotypes and racist rhetoric used against them in various forms of media and social settings. Even, President Barack Obama experienced overt racist attitudes while holding the highest office in America. What's more, racism and white supremacist thoughts constantly being disseminated throughout society causes African Americans to endure thoughts of inferiority. These thoughts of inadequacy harm and hinder the mental well-being of African Americans.

Therefore, hooks suggests strategies to end the propagation of thoughts of domination in the United States. She believes that African Americans as well as other Americans have the responsibility to end thoughts of domination. Everyone must see the need for racism and white supremacist thought to be eliminated from societal structures in order to heal and create a society that is more

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equal and just. An American society that eliminates ideals of dominance provides African Americans with an opportunity to recover from previously experienced trauma (hooks, 2013).

### 3. Practicing the Teachings of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

Another antidote that hooks presents to end thoughts of domination is to practice the teachings and behavior of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Dr. King heavily employed love ethics into his activism as a civil rights leader in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century (hooks, 2013). Love ethics is the idea to focus on the conditions of human beings and creating a community of caring rather than putting attention on wealth and world domination. hooks argues that there was not a more successful effort in dismantling hate and create a community of love and acceptance than what Dr. King was able to accomplish during the modern Civil Rights Movement. His methods for resisting violent retaliation against assailants proved to be more persuasive in gaining civil rights for African Americans than a brutal militant response. Thus, adopting Dr. King's teachings helps to heal from the effects of racism and white supremacist thoughts. African Americans should utilize love ethics in order to combat social evils and domination that exists in the United States. It is imperative for African Americans to repel and disengage in hateful speech and actions that led to their own mistreatment and degradation in America. Dr. King's teachings help people in the black community become active participants in overcoming their own mental health concerns by engaging in positive strategies to fight against their subordinate treatment (hooks, 2013).

### 4. Sharing Circles and the Gift of Interdependency

In addition to creating a community of caring, hooks encourages African American women to communicate and form bonds within their work and school environments. In the book entitled, *Sisters of the yam: Black Women and Self-Recovery*, hooks recounts her experience as a professor gathering with a group of black women students (hooks, 1993). She explains that the group of black women grew out of a need for women of color to unite and create a safe place for one another within a predominately white institution. hooks explains that these sister circles or sharing circles help black women to cope with Eurocentric institutions that disengage with people of color. What's more, it counteracts the negative effects of interfacing with people who continue to employ racist thoughts and behaviors at their jobs, schools, and public spheres. Together, black women were able to share their emotions and experiences with each other without the fear of skepticism from those who set out to discredit or are in disbelief about their encounters with racism and sexism. hooks insist that sharing circles recreates a sense of peace and security for black women that they once had living in their childhood homes, where they were frequently supported, celebrated, and loved.

Furthermore, sharing circles provides black women with a positive outlet so

that they are not holding on to stress and anger, which could later lead to physical and mental health issues. These groups allow black women to be heard and respected. Being heard and respected is important when trying to build self-esteem and fighting against racism, sexism and other forms of oppressions. It is especially important that black women value their bodies, as hooks states, “If black women have not learned to value our bodies, then we cannot respond fully to endangering them by undue stress,” (hooks, 1993). Hence, a sharing circle is a necessary outlet for African American women to feel empowered and heal. Black women who feel empowered often lead healthier and more valuable lives. A significant part of leading a healthy life for black women is their ability to create a defense against the notions of white supremacy that bombarded them on a continued basis.

In the book entitled, *All About Love: New Visions*, hooks warns people against thinking that gathering together to talk about traumatic experiences creates a co-dependency among each other (hooks, 2018). Communities are created by people who share the same neighborhood, environment or common views and lifestyles. It is helpful if communities come together to create a healing environment where people can find love and support. hooks suggests that people within their own communities should examine healing-community models like Alcohol Anonymous (AA) to understand how to create a community of healing. When referring to AA hooks writes, “This community offers to individuals, some for the first time ever in their lives, a taste of that acceptance, care, knowledge, and responsibility that is love in action. Rarely, if ever, are any of us healed in isolation. Healing is an act of communion,” (hooks, 2018). Developing sharing circles and healing communities is an important aspect of life. People can recover from their past experiences if they are surrounded by a community of people who are sensitive to their distress and willing to listen and understand their pain. Thus, it is essential for African Americans to seek the same kind of community when they are faced with racist and sexist oppression. African Americans must willfully form communities that will allow them to heal from their traumatic experiences that they have endured by living in a society that suppresses their lived experiences. This healing process should lead to improving the mental health of the black community.

## **5. Black Men Defining Masculinity for Themselves**

Albeit, black men living healthy and prosperous lives is contingent upon their ability to develop an identity for themselves independent from societal structures and mainstream media’s depiction of masculinity in the United States. hooks’ book entitled, *We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity*, addresses the pressure that is placed on men to uphold a tough-masculine persona in America (hooks, 2004b). American societies frequently promote patriarchal ideas of men and boys displaying toughness and anger in order to showcase their strength and dominance. She explains that both white and black men, when they are children,

are taught to only communicate fury and violent emotions openly in public. Further, they are restricted from showing fear, tenderness, and overt joy. However, African American boys and men are more often penalized and criminalized for their outwardly expression of rage than their white counterparts. The failure of black men to express their full emotions, while being victimized for their bouts of anger leads them to feel loss, depressed and confused about their own place in society.

For this reason, it is best for black men to liberate themselves from the confines of patriarchal masculinity that puts them in an unfair position to be identified as dangerous and violent. Black men must create their own definition of what it means to be an adult male. They should be able to display their own thoughts of manhood without it being seen as weak and insufficient. African American males' new-formed identity must showcase full ranges of emotions that provides them a sense of freedom and self-determination. This newfound freedom will allow them to flourish and thrive in their manhood. Moreover, black men who construct their own self-identity will rid themselves of the toxic behavior that hinders their mental health. Much like black women, black men's mental health is attached to their capacity to behave in a manner that allows them to feel emboldened and not marginalized (hooks, 2004b).

## 6. Acknowledging and Dismantling Institutional Racism

While highlighting the relationships between black men and women, hooks recognizes how African Americans' low self-esteem is connected to negative depictions of the black family. In the book entitled, *Rock My Soul: Black People and Self-esteem*, hooks mentions how black families have never fitted into the mold of the patriarchal family in the United States (hooks, 2004a). During the time of slavery in America, Africans and people of African descent were separated from their blood relatives and discouraged by law from forming familial bonds. African Americans were forced to form kinship-like bonds outside of the patriarchal family framework in order to survive the effects of the institution of slavery. Even more, hooks insists that continuous efforts were made to disrupt black families after slavery ended.

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, hooks believes one of the main contributors to the negative portrayal of black families was Daniel Moynihan's "The Negro Family: The Case for National Action." The Moynihan Report, as it is commonly referred to, reported on the impoverished lives of African Americans in the mid-sixties. hooks revealed that Moynihan compared lower-class black families to middle-class white families instead of white families with similar economic background. The report describes most black families as being matriarchal due to the fact that there was no father at home or the father was jobless. The idea of a matriarchal family is seen as a negative in comparison to middle-class families who often were patriarchal families. Americans were persuaded to believe that black families were inadequate because they did not have the same family structures as

white families. What's more, hooks believed that many black civil rights leaders began to adopt the same rhetoric as the Moynihan report to gain equal rights during the Civil Rights Movement in America (hooks, 2004a).

Consequently, leadership within the black community mirroring the same sentiments as the Moynihan Report eventually caused doubt and thoughts of failure among black men and women. Black men and women began to feel inadequate because they were not seemingly living up to the standards of modern society. hooks captured the common sentiments among the black men and women as she writes:

If masculinity could only be achieved by protecting and providing for one's family, then under this system black men could never be "real men." Concurrently, if femininity could only be achieved by the emotionally fragile, fair-skinned, long-haired angel in the house who is unable to work outside the home, then black women could never be "real women." Prior to racial integration black folks developed their own modified versions of these standards, more fitting to the reality of black life. Had they not done so, no black families would have been places where healthy self-esteem could emerge (hooks, 2004a).

hooks provides helpful insight into how the promotion of the patriarchal family as the ideal family structure for African Americans threatens the self-esteem of black families. Moynihan and similar sociologists are unfair and only set out to harm black families' emotional and mental well-being by measuring them by unrealistic standards. It is vital for African Americans not to measure their lives by white supremacist ideals. As an alternative, black families should embrace the loving kinships and communities that they have formed for themselves. People loving themselves and those around them improve self-esteem, which aids in the development of positive mental health (hooks, 2004a).

In her book entitled, *Salvation: Black People and Love*, hooks recognize colorism as an issue that African Americans should resolve in order to heal from racist wounding (hooks, 2001). She acknowledges the historical significance of colorism on African Americans as she wrote:

White supremacist practices of breeding through rape of black women by white masters produced mixed-race off-spring whose skin color and facial features were often radically different from the black norm. This led to the formation of a color caste aesthetic. While white racists had never deemed black people beautiful before, they had a higher aesthetic regard for racially mixed black folks. When that regard took the form of granting privileges and rewards on the basis of skin color, black people began to internalize similar aesthetic values (hooks, 2001).

African Americans have been conditioned, from the time of slavery in America, to believe in a color caste system that rewards light-skinned African Americans over their darker hued brethren. This caste system has caused low self-esteem



and divisiveness within the African American community that still exist today (hooks, 2001).

Hence, it is important for African Americans to disengage from promoting colorism because it has a negative impact on how they value themselves, which result in poor mental health. hooks suggests for African Americans to continue the celebration of all various black hues that derived from the Black Power movement of the 1960s and 1970s. African Americans should embrace one another's distinct beauty instead of letting it separate them. Furthermore, African Americans must be conscious of the historical social dynamics, like colorism, that continue to impede their mental well-being. Being unaware of how historically white supremacist thoughts have traumatized and harmed African Americans' mental health leaves people in black communities at risk of upholding racist systems that seeks to disrupt and violate their quality of life (hooks, 2001).

## 7. Conclusion

Overall, this compilation of bell hooks' work is in no way proposing that African Americans should refrain from seeking medical assistance and instead read African literature. Instead, these works present African Americans with a starting point towards addressing their mental health. By reading the selected six books, African Americans will comprehend the importance in creating a community for themselves that allows for healing and protection from mental as well as other abuses. They can begin to understand the importance of addressing their mental health and reaching out to others to heal. Mental health is a serious issue that must be addressed within the African American community. Traditionally, African Americans have not pursued help for undergoing traumatic experiences. Many people within the black community avoid reaching out to mental health professionals because their suffering, due to racism and sexism, is often a shared experience. These shared experiences cause many black people to not want to appear weak or unusual to others who have endured the same mistreatments. Hence, African Americans are refusing to seek treatment for their minor episodes of anxiety, stress, and depression far too often. Although their reasons for distrusting the medical profession are valid, black communities must find alternative solutions to manage their mental health. What's more, African Americans must learn to rely on each other to effectively resolve mental health issues that are the result of systematic oppressions. More research should be conducted on African Americans' mental health in order to increase their participation in addressing mental health concerns that are prevalent in their community.

## Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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