


An analysis of bell hooks' *Sisters of the Yam*: intersectionality and the constitution of afro-subjectivity in black women

ARTIGO

Carine Campos Santosⁱ 

Universidade Federal do Triângulo Mineiro (UFTM), Uberaba, MG, Brasil

Leiliane da Silva Bernardesⁱⁱ 

Universidade Estadual Júlio de Mesquita Filho - Unesp, Franca, SP, Brasil

Sara Santos Dias Costaⁱⁱⁱ 

Faculdades Associadas de Uberaba - FAZU, Uberaba, MG, Brasil

Maylla Monnik Rodrigues de Sousa Chaveiro^{iv} 

Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina (UFSC), SC, Brasil

Abstract

This article aims to promote intersectional analyses of the constitution of Afro-subjectivity among Black women in Brazil, based on a reading of bell hooks's literary work, "The Yam Sisters." The author engages in an insurgent movement, proposing creative and powerful epistemological elaborations about the resistance and existence of Black women. This work, which is the result of meetings organized by the Center for Research in Psychology and Ethnic-Racial Relations (NEGREPSI), is a bibliographic and exploratory study. Interdisciplinary references were used to consider the book's impact on the mental health of Black women and the fight against racial and gender-based violence. We conclude that "The Yam Sisters" has been fundamental in promoting reflections on the constitution of Afro-subjectivity among Black women, playing a crucial role in creating spaces for reflection and collective healing, by offering essential tools for emancipation and health.

Keywords: Black Feminism. Intersectionality. Blackness. Black Literature.

Uma análise do livro *Irmãs do Inhamé* de bell hooks: interseccionalidade e constituição de afrosubjetividade de mulheres negras

Resumo

Este artigo tem por objetivo promover análises interseccionais sobre a constituição de afrosubjetividade em mulheres negras no Brasil, a partir da leitura da obra literária *Irmãs do Inhamé* de bell hooks. A autora realiza um movimento de insurgência, propondo elaborações epistemológicas criativas e potentes acerca das resistências e existências de mulheres negras. Este trabalho é fruto de encontros promovidos pelo Núcleo de Pesquisa em Psicologia e Relações Étnico-Raciais (NEGREPSI), tratando-se de uma pesquisa de caráter bibliográfico e de natureza exploratória. Foram utilizadas referências interdisciplinares para pensar os impactos do livro na saúde mental de mulheres negras e no combate às violências raciais e de gênero. Concluímos que a obra *Irmãs do Inhamé* tem sido fundamental para promover reflexões acerca da constituição de afrosubjetividade em mulheres negras, desempenhando um papel crucial na criação de espaços de

reflexão e cura coletiva ao oferecer ferramentas essenciais para a emancipação e saúde.

Palavras-chave: Feminismo Negro. Interseccionalidade. Negritude. Literatura Negra.

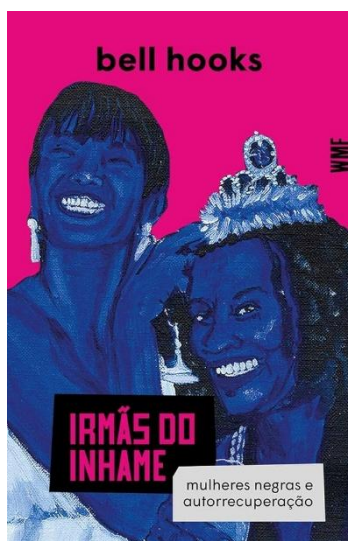
1 Introduction

2

Literary production authored by Black women plays an important role in symbolizing hope for the Black diaspora. *Sisters of the Yam: Black Women and Self-Recovery* is a literary work originally published in the United States in 1993, written by Gloria Jean Watkins, better known by her pseudonym bell hooks (1952–2021).

Recognized as a writer, professor, and Black activist of great relevance to both antiracist and feminist movements, bell hooks (2023) dedicated herself to critical reflections during a period in which Black women gained greater visibility as authors and readers, primarily through fictional narratives addressing stories of trauma. In this context, by investigating non-fiction, therapeutic writings, academic texts, and more popular works, her intention was to identify productions that, in addition to promoting catharsis, offered practical guides for the processes of healing, self-help, self-recovery, and political resistance.

Figure 1 – Cover of *Sisters of the Yam* (Brazilian edition)



Source: Personal collection

Literature produced by Black women has played and continues to play a pivotal role in public awareness and in fostering critical engagement with our emotional lives, the need for self-help, and the search for ways to promote quality of life and health. This is due to unresolved historical traumas and collective anguish caused by different systems of oppression, which are in some way interconnected and related to race, gender, class, and sexual orientation, threatening life itself (hooks, 2023).

Considering the social, cultural, and political reading of the pains and anguish experienced by Black women (hooks, 2023; Benedito; Fernandes, 2020; Santos *et al.*, 2023), *Sisters of the Yam* stands out as a timely book, both for promoting critical consciousness and understanding of our lived experiences in the world, and for encouraging effective change, in which choosing well-being is configured as a political act. In the words of the author:

Healing occurs through testimony, through the union of everything that is present, and through reconciliation. This is a book about reconciliation. Its purpose is to serve as a map, tracing a journey that can lead us back to that dark and deep place

within ourselves, where we first came to know and love ourselves, where the arms that held us still embrace us (hooks, 2023, p. 42).

Thus, this study is justified by the need to conduct literary analyses that consider the realities of Black people, recognizing the importance of engaging with literature that fosters proximity to lived experiences and reflections related to self-care, relationships with the body, affective and family relationships, community life, and, more precisely, diasporic connections, with a specific emphasis on gender intersectionality. Accordingly, various theoretical and critical readings, as well as reflections, were conducted to assist in the development of the analyses presented in this research.

The study was carried out within the Núcleo de Estudos e Pesquisa em Relações Étnico-Raciais e Psicologia – Negrepsi (Center for Studies and Research on Ethnic-Racial Relations and Psychology), which functions as an academic *quilombamento* space—bringing together people from different undergraduate and graduate programs with the goal of sharing diverse avenues of knowledge production, as well as serving as a territory of ancestry, empowerment, and support for antiracist projects and actions.

The group met biweekly between March and July 2024 to discuss the book in question. Meetings were held on Mondays at 6 p.m., online via Google Meet, with a minimum duration of 90 minutes. Selected chapters of the book were read in advance and discussed sequentially during the meetings. It is worth noting that these sessions were not recorded, which allowed for the sharing of personal anguish and pain, providing a confidential and safe space.

Figure 2 - Record of Negrepsi meetings for the discussion of the book



Source: instagram @negrepsi

Figure 3 - Record of Negrepsi meetings for the discussion of the book



Source: instagram @negrepsi

Moreover, Negrepsi was composed mostly of Black women. Within this reflective space, it became possible to look at ourselves through the elements offered by bell hooks

in *Sisters of the Yam*. Thus, beyond being a space for research and teaching, it also served as a therapeutic space for Black men and women in academia. Consequently, the collective reading of the book mobilized many internal contents and strengthened our Afro-subjectivity, fostering self-knowledge beyond the colonial wounds imposed by racism and sexism on our bodies.

2 Strategies of self-recovery: “by a Black woman, for Black women, about Black women”

From the preface to the Brazilian edition, written by the History of the Americas professor at the Universidade Federal Fluminense – UFF (Federal Fluminense University), Ynaê Lopes dos Santos, the work emphasizes the importance of books about Black women, written by Black women. Considering that patriarchal, sexist, and misogynistic violences are materialized in the lives of these women, it becomes urgent to weave new meanings of sisterhood. In this regard, the main aspect to be highlighted in this work is that, in addition to being the result of a collective of Black women within the university environment, it reflects collective experiences in the pursuit of understanding and alleviating loneliness from a political perspective of the wounds imposed.

To say that it is a book written by a Black woman, for Black women, about Black women is to acknowledge the intimate aspects that constitute our life histories, resulting from a process that, although singular, also presents itself as collective. In this context of struggles against racism and sexism—which shape both how we are seen and how people interact with us—we reaffirm that the healing process must also be collective, which includes Black men as well, although the focus of this manuscript is directly on Black women.

In this sense, bell hooks emphasizes that an important source of healing arises when we access all the factors that cause specific pain, which implies confronting racism, sexism, class exploitation, homophobia, and other structures of domination that operate in

our daily lives. The creation of resistance strategies, both personal and collective, develops from a process of awareness.

The self-recovery of Black women, like all Black self-recovery, is an expression of a libertarian political practice. Living—as we do—in a white supremacist capitalist patriarchy, which can most effectively exploit us when we lack a firm foundation in self and identity (the awareness of who we are and where we come from), choosing “well-being” is an act of political resistance (hooks, 2023, p. 39).

7

Regarding the process of developing awareness, Bárbara Borges and Francinai Gomes (2023) point out that we are often seduced by the belief that it would be easier not to understand certain historical processes and forms of violence. However, the project of racial alienation is a political strategy that prevents us from creating new possibilities of being and existing. When we refuse to see our color, we cease to look at our history and who we are. Thus, we emphasize the importance of reclaiming ourselves in order to build an identity compatible with our bodies, thereby constituting an Afro-subjectivity. In this context, the creation of self-recovery strategies emerges as one of the possible paths, since, as bell hooks emphasizes, the field of mental health is a fundamental area in the struggle for Black liberation—where psychological problems are not ignored but can lead us to a place of reconciliation.

3 *Sisters of the Yam*: Intersectionality and Afro-Subjectivity

The concept of intersectionality can be accessed at various points in bell hooks' *Sisters of the Yam*. This concept is polysemous (Chaveiro, 2024) and was coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw (Crenshaw, 1997) as a theoretical-methodological tool capable of analyzing the structure of overlapping oppressions and how they interact to create unique experiences of discrimination and privilege. According to Crenshaw:

The combination of multiple systems of subordination has been described in various ways: compound discrimination, multiple burdens, or as double or triple discrimination. Intersectionality is a conceptualization of the problem that seeks to capture the structural and dynamic consequences of the interaction between two or more axes of subordination. It specifically addresses the ways in which racism,

patriarchy, class oppression, and other discriminatory systems create basic inequalities that structure the relative positions of women, races, ethnicities, classes, and others. Furthermore, intersectionality considers how specific actions and policies generate oppressions that flow along these axes, constituting dynamic or active aspects of disempowerment (Crenshaw, 2002, p. 177).

In this sense, the experiences of Black women are almost always permeated by violence, since the system is simultaneously racist and sexist. Thus, experiences of gender and racial oppression have been constitutive of subjectivities, producing invisibility, epistemicide, and physical, mental, and spiritual illness.

Through the elucidation of the concept of intersectionality, it is possible to affirm that bell hooks weaves intersectional reflections on the social, cultural, psychic, and economic realities of Black women within a context of coloniality. Additionally, she problematizes the scarcity of images of Black women in art, literature, television, and magazines, as a way in which the white supremacist system seeks to render them invisible. In her work, the author points out that most Black women perceive themselves as unattractive due to the simultaneous operation of sexism and racism in the construction of subjectivities.

Sisters of the Yam addresses very profound questions regarding the modes of existence of Black people. One of these issues is discussed in a dedicated chapter titled “Moving Away from Addiction.” According to the author, Black women, being constantly exposed to high levels of violence, are vulnerable to addictions. In her words: “Addictions tend to become central in the lives of Black women when we experience stress that influences our lives” (hooks, 2023, p. 111). In this regard, the intersection of race/ethnicity and gender produces inequalities that increase the likelihood that Black women will be in a context of addiction.

According to bell hooks:

Considering how Black people have been socialized, from slavery to the present day, to believe that we can only survive with the paternalistic support of a white power structure, is it any wonder that addiction has become so pervasive in our communities? (hooks, 2023, p. 106).

According to the author, hair texture in Black women is a point that strongly affects the construction of identity. Accessing natural hair as a problematic place in our body is a racist and sexist construction (hooks, 2023; Chaveiro, 2020), representing the convergence of violences. Throughout the book, hooks maps multiple oppressions that cause pain to Black women, while also outlining strategies to escape these systems of oppression and ancestral healing possibilities that pulse through our bodies.

The author also points out that, in recent years, Black women continue to collectively challenge racism and sexism. They have bravely resisted multiple oppressions through the decolonization of subjectivities and the stereotypes of the cis-heteropatriarchy. This rupture emerges from the shift from the position of object to that of empowered subjects, producing knowledge distinct from colonial and sexist norms.

According to hooks, all Black people in this colonial and Eurocentric system are wounded by white racial supremacy and racism. Such systems have historically and transgenerationally condemned Black people to subalternity. For the author, these dynamics affect mental health, self-esteem, and the well-being of Black individuals, wounding hearts, minds, and spirits. Therefore, aspects of Afro-subjectivity in hooks' work can be understood as a way to recognize and value the histories of Black people in the diaspora, aiming to promote mental health within this community.

Before understanding the concept of Afro-subjectivity, it is important to introduce the notion of Afrocentricity. Philosopher and scholar Molefi Kete Asante (2009, 2016) highlights that: "Afrocentricity is a critique of cultural and economic domination, as well as an act of psychological and social presence in response to Eurocentric hegemony" (Asante, 2016, p.10). According to Asante, valuing African culture should underpin a new approach to knowledge, aiming to develop strategies for survival, knowledge construction, and the promotion of mental health among Africans and African diasporic people (Asante, 2009). It is a way to reassess how Black people perceive themselves and are perceived in Western contexts, establishing an anti-racist ideology. In the words of the author:

Afrocentricity also presents itself as a form of anti-racist, anti-bourgeois, and anti-sexist ideology that is new, innovative, challenging, and capable of creating exciting

ways to acquire knowledge based on the reestablishment of the location of a text, a speech, or a phenomenon (Asante, 2016, p.11).

Simultaneously, Brazilian psychoanalyst and psychiatrist Neusa Santos Souza (1983/2021) argues that the subjectivity and psychic formation of Black people are influenced by imaginaries of a white Other, which establishes the standard of what is considered “good,” beautiful, and socially acceptable, impacting the self-image of Black subjects. In this sense, the author asserts that true subjective autonomy is achieved through a self-authored discourse—something generally denied to Black and African diasporic people. Thus, Afro-subjectivity can be understood as an affirmation of the position of subjecthood for Black people in relation to their own histories and experiences, challenging traditional paradigms of European conceptual domination over what it means to be Black. As psychologist and researcher Maylla Chaveiro (2023) observes:

We consider here that the production of strategies and methodological tools alternative to universal perspectives validated by Western rationality can be envisaged through the conception of Afrocentricity, to think about the constitution of Afro-subjectivity, feelings, emotions, capacities, and agency of Black people (Chaveiro, 2023, p.7).

Moreover, the process of Black people assimilating into spaces of power intersects (Crenshaw, 2004) with racial, sexual, gender, and class-based violence that affects Black women and contributes to the constitution of their subjectivities. It is noteworthy that this social construction intensifies across different cultures and historical periods, such that stereotypes are continuously nourished, constructed, and legitimized, directly impacting the suffering of Black women. Accordingly, “being Black” and “being a woman” carry expectations regarding care for others, the objectification of the Black woman’s body, and giving without expecting reciprocity—an echo of the process of enslavement. Paid work in caregiving professions is minimal, and since most female-headed households are classified as single-parent, they must ensure subsistence. At times, in pursuit of better socioeconomic conditions, they end up alienated by the contemporary white supremacist

patriarchy, distancing themselves from collective constructions and embracing narratives that valorize meritocracy. In this regard, it is important to highlight:

Devastating poverty and the growing gaps between Black people who have gained access to economic privilege and the vast majority who, it seems, will remain poor forever, hinder the construction and maintenance of community by individuals. Kinship ties among Black people are more easily threatened and broken now than in other historical moments, when material well-being was harder to achieve for Black people. Pervasive addiction, spread across all classes of Black people, is another indication of our collective crisis. Black people are indeed wounded by dominating forces. Despite our access to material privileges, all Black people are wounded by white supremacy, racism, sexism, and a capitalist economic system that collectively condemns us to a position of lower class (hooks, 2023, p. 17).

The continuous collective organization to find and share ways to heal is a necessary and available tool, for the master's weapons will not dismantle the “big house” (Lorde, 2000). Afrocentric literary works that reference the pain experienced by Black people bring us consciously closer to contemporary collective suffering and, above all, guide us to the convergence of methods of healing. The academic spaces traversed by the author indicated and denounced that experiences of violence were not simply matters of economics. In this regard, racial privilege evidences how, at all levels, the white group asserted its supremacy at the expense of and in the presence of Black people. Thus, exploitation was not merely economic; the dominant group also extracted psychological, cultural, and ideological colonialist surplus value. In a “sophisticated” manner, exploitation remained, even as we refuse to remain silent in the face of racial violence (Gonzalez, 2020).

Similarly, within the research nucleus, we also perceived and discussed the confluences of academicism and institutional racism in our academic productions as Black women. If, to enter academic institutions, the challenge persists, to remain requires much more: it is essential to care for mental health, as the body or bodily image is one of the fundamental components in the construction of individual identity (Santos, 1983/2021). The image or statement that a subject has of themselves is based on experiences of pain, pleasure, or displeasure. Adversities affect and make non-white populations ill within universities; surviving in hostile and challenging spaces requires *quilombamento*—

collective protection and affective listening—from those who have managed to pass through and remain alive in the process. As Neusa Santos contributes (1983/2021):

The discrimination that renders one's body an object shows no respite from the humiliation suffered by the Black subject who does not relinquish their human rights, resigning themselves to the passive condition of being "inferior"—a curious and tragic contradiction. It is precisely at the moment when the Black person claims their condition of equality before society that the image of their body appears as an intruder, as an evil to be corrected, in the face of a mind that seeks emancipation and fights for freedom. One of the interviewees stated: "I feel the racial problem as a wound. It is something I think and feel all the time. It is something that never heals" (Santos, 1983, p.08).

Thus, deconstructing what has been constructed around being a Black woman, escaping stereotypes, sexualization, and the objectification of the Black female body, and valuing production, *escrevivência* (writing as lived experience), and bodily presence in the world (Luedji Luna, 2017) is an arduous process, since the construction of identity as a Black woman is also constituted through deconstructions (hooks, 2019).

Finally, the understanding of Afro-subjectivity emerges and intersects both racial and gender issues, as observed in the intersectional analysis. With the necessity of fostering hope and constructing positive narratives of Black women (Evaristo, 2005; Veiga, 2022; Chaveiro, 2023), the self-help literature represented by *Sisters of the Yam* embodies a recovery of ancestry, a valorization of affective bonds and culture, as well as of Black subjectivities. This process consequently culminates in the promotion of mental health and the creation of spaces for the construction of anti-racist and Afrocentric knowledge.

4 Final Considerations

The power of bell hooks' literary work *Sisters of the Yam* opens spaces and times of resistance, inviting us to truly confront the wounds common to Black women and to collectively develop greater self-esteem, sisterhood, and identity, breaking away from cis-heteronormative standards.

In the Negrepsi meetings, it was possible to observe that, collectively, there was an acknowledgment of needs that we had previously believed to be personal, and through

reading, we began to identify them as collective. By expressing pain, naming it, and recognizing its existence—breaking through denial—it became possible to experience certain forms of mourning and begin anew. Engaging in dialogue about themes such as self-care, truth, self-recovery, work, purpose, connection, loss, responsibilities, romantic love, stress, peace, communion, and reconciliation in an intersectional way—investigating how manifestations of gender, race, class, and sex intersect and converge in our relationships—proved essential, since the violences suffered leave deep marks that can be healed and re-signified when we raise our voices.

Thus, unlearning conventional ways of being, existing, and thinking in the world and finding our way back to moments collectively celebrated by our ancestry gradually provided the group with the capacity to cope with the imposed reality and create strategies for facing life's and death's changes. Understanding that abandoning old ways and breaking patterns is akin to dying implies leaving behind former ways of life in order to move forward with new possibilities, full of meaning and relationships.

Moreover, Black literature serves as a gateway to the possibility of dreaming and re-signifying experiences, understanding anguish, drawing nourishment from collective and individual experience as a means of recreating realities, promoting new narratives, and breaking cycles of violence (Monteiro, 2018; Evaristo *et al.*, 2020; Veiga, 2021).

Therefore, reading and studying the work act as a balm that guides, collectively and for the collective, toward the development of critical consciousness, providing possible resources for the constitution of Afro-subjectivity among Black women in a context of coloniality. Throughout this research, it also became evident that, although the work is referred to as a balm for the souls of us Black women—enabling discussions and identification among readers—it should also be read and understood attentively by white people, playing a fundamental role in the anti-racist struggle, public awareness, and the critical awakening of society as a whole, leading to new perspectives.

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ⁱ Carine Campos Santos, ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0758-6916>

Universidade Federal do Triângulo Mineiro (UFTM).

Psicóloga pela Universidade Federal do Triângulo Mineiro (UFTM). Mestranda em Psicologia e Famílias pela mesma instituição. Co-Diretora Geral Discente da Liga Acadêmica de Relações Étnico-Raciais Sankofa; Membro do Núcleo de Estudos e Pesquisa em Relações Étnico-Raciais (Negrepsi) e do Núcleo de Estudos e Pesquisas em Interseccionalidade e Masculinidades (Nepim).

Author contribution: Redação, análise dos dados e fundamentação epistemológica.

Lattes: <http://lattes.cnpq.br/4771166922588596>

E-mail: carinecampos.santos@yahoo.com

ii **Leiliane da Silva Bernardes**, ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3177-1003>

Universidade Paulista – Júlio de Mesquita Filho

Especialista em Gestão Pública pela Universidade Federal de Uberlândia - MG. Pós-Graduada em Políticas Sociais e Questão Racial pela Universidade Federal do Triângulo Mineiro - UFTM. Mestranda pelo Programa de Pós-Graduação em Serviço Social pela Universidade Paulista – Júlio de Mesquita Filho, Bacharel em Serviço Social pela UNIPAC-MG.

Author contribution: Redação, análise dos dados e fundamentação epistemológica.

Lattes: <http://lattes.cnpq.br/9770659602675076>

E-mail: leilianebernardesoficial@gmail.com

iii **Sara Santos Dias Costa**, ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1822-0450>

Faculdades Associadas de Uberaba – FAZU

Psicóloga pela Universidade Federal do Tocantins - UFT (2022). Mestra em Psicologia na linha de pesquisa Psicologia e Saúde pela Universidade Federal do Triângulo Mineiro - UFTM (2024). Professora do curso de Psicologia das Faculdades Associadas de Uberaba - FAZU.

Author contribution: Redação, análise dos dados e fundamentação epistemológica.

Lattes: <https://lattes.cnpq.br/7042106760043150>

E-mail: sasantosd@outlook.com

iv **Maylla Monnik Rodrigues de Sousa Chaveiro**, ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7581-105X>

Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina (UFSC)

Doutora pelo Programa de Pós-Graduação Interdisciplinar em Ciências Humanas da Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina (UFSC). Mestra e graduada pelo Programa de Pós-Graduação em Psicologia da Universidade Federal de Mato Grosso do Sul (UFMS).

Author contribution: Redação, fundamentação epistemológica e formatação.

Lattes: <http://lattes.cnpq.br/0617185690120819>

E-mail: maylla.chaveiro@gmail.com

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