

This anthology examines ways its contributors have remained devoted to social justice through the lens of scholarly research and the power of artistic expression across differences of race, gender, class, sexuality, ability, and culture.

**How We Made It Over:
Education in the Spirit of Love for Social Justice**

By Gary L. Lemons

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HOW WE MADE IT OVER

EDUCATION IN THE SPIRIT OF LOVE
FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE

GARY L. LEMONS

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[bell] hooks' life ... is a testimony to the resilience of the human spirit, one's ability to overcome adversities. hooks attributes her resilience of spirit to role models like the Latin American Liberation theologian Gustavo Gutierrez, the Brazilian Paulo Freire, Lorraine Hansberry, Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh, James Baldwin, Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, Jr., and her great grandmother Bell Hooks.

Namulundah Florence, *bell hooks' Engaged Pedagogy:
A Transgressive Education for Critical Consciousness*

The goal of a knowledge arising from love is the reunification and reconstruction of broken selves and worlds. A knowledge born of compassion aims not at exploiting and manipulating creation but a reconciling the world to itself. The mind motivated by compassion reaching out to know as the heart reaches out to love. Here, the act of knowing is an act of love, the act of entering and embracing the reality of the other, of allowing the other to enter and embrace our own. In such knowing we know and are known as members of one community, and our knowing becomes a way of reweaving that community's bond.

Parker J. Palmer, *To Know as We Are Known: Education as a Spiritual Journey* (1983)

And now these three remain: faith, hope, and love. But the greatest of these is love.

I Corinthians 13:13 (*The Bible*, New International Version)

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Introduction
Many Voices, One United Body
Envisioning a “Beloved Community”
Gary L. Lemons

In a *beloved community* solidarity and trust are grounded in profound commitment to a shared vision. Those of us who are always anti-racist long for a world in which everyone can form a *beloved community* where borders can be crossed and cultural hybridity celebrated. Anyone can begin to make such a community by truly seeking to live in an anti-racist world. If that longing guides our vision and our actions, the new culture will be born and anti-racist communities of resistance will emerge everywhere. That is where we must go from here.

bell hooks, *Killing Rage: Ending Racism*

Love, truth, and the courage to do what is right should be our own guideposts on this lifelong journey. Martin Luther King, Jr., showed us the way; he showed us the Dream—and we responded with full hearts. Martin was an optimist. I am too. I do believe that one day our strength to love shall bring the Dream to fruition and the Beloved Community to earth.

Coretta Scott King, “Foreword to the 1981 Edition,” *A Gift of Love: Sermons from Strength to Love and Other Preachings*, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

To love, we have to let fear go and live faith-based lives. Living in faith means that we recognize, as our wise [B]lack female ancestors did, that we do have the power to decolonize our minds, invent ourselves, and dwell in the spirit of love that is our true destiny.

bell hooks, *Salvation: Black People and Love*

My Spiritual Calling

“Dwell[ing] in the Spirit of Love ... Our True Destiny”

As I open *How We Made It Over* with the “Preface” recounting the contents of the “Preface” I wrote for *Liberation for the Oppressed: Community Healing through Activist Transformation, A Call to CHAT* (2022), I reclaim my spiritual calling to bring together individuals who labor for “education in the Spirit of love for social justice.” This collective represents the sacred unity of bell hooks’ vision of “education as the practice of freedom” with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s dream of a “beloved community.” Yet again, yearning to represent these revolutionary concepts in my mind, body, and soul—it became clear to me that my “call for papers” for *How We Made It Over* had to do with the Spirit of love calling me to interconnect the goal I conceptualized for each anthology. I must continue the community bridge-building assignment given to me. I must continue to envision the classroom as a sacred “dwell[ing]” for the practice of self-liberation. In this visionary space, I must continue to interconnect my commitment to teaching revolutionary BIPOC (Black Indigenous People of Color) literature and biblical studies with innovative, pedagogical strategies aimed to end all forms of systemic and institutionalized oppression.

Having been a longstanding student and teacher of bell hooks’ writings, my pedagogical practice remains centered on revolutionary ideas of liberation rooted in Black feminist and womanist thought. In truth, however—while teaching my courses in this groundbreaking context—I have had to “let go the fear” of opposition. Why should I teach literature through the lens of Black feminist and womanist thought? Truthfully, hooks’ anti-oppressive writings have consistently provided me the self-liberating foundation upon which I have structurally based my spiritually enriched pedagogical practice. In *Critical Perspectives on bell hooks* (2009), Nancy E. Nienhuis states in “‘Revolutionary Interdependence’ bell hooks’s Ethic of Love as a Basis For a Feminist Liberation Theology of the Neighbor”—

hooks lays the groundwork for a different way of being, for a revolutionary interdependence that is profoundly spiritual and has the potential to change from the inside out, and thus to transform the world. Moreover, her work provides a powerful basis for feminist liberation theologies... While her focus remains on [B]lack communities, hooks’s analysis pertains to modern life generally. We live

in silos of race, class, gender, sexual orientation, and more. The borders between our communities, whether gated or not, create a line that white supremacist capitalist patriarchy is designed to reinforce. The stronger these borders, the less likely it is that we have any sense of what each other's lives are like, making it all but impossible for us to work together effectively. *This supreme alienation fosters fear, distrust, and even hatred of the other. By making us suspicious of each other, systems of power and oppression undermining solidarity, which of course is a direct benefit to those who are privileged and elite.* (Emphasis added, 202-203)

Even as I would claim bell hooks as my professional mentor, at the same time, I have always had to deal with the complex realities of being a Black male professor in PWIs (Predominately White Institutions). Teaching BIPOC literature and biblical studies in a Black feminist and womanist context has and continues to be a personal, political, and professional challenge.

Collective Creativity for Community Bridge-Building

As I have written over time in the evolution of my dedication to teaching for teacher/student self-liberation espoused by bell hooks, I would be led to document the liberating agency of a pedagogical case-study aimed to create a “beloved community” in the college classroom. Connecting students in unity toward promoting principles of social justice and equality—across differences of race, gender, class, sexuality, culture, ability, and generation—is according to hooks all about love for “self-actualization.” With this aim consistently in my mind, I have collaborated with teachers, students, and community activists to create and publish *bridge-building* collections of anti-oppressive writings and visual artworks.¹ In *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*, bell hooks says: “Professors who embrace the challenge of self-actualization will be better able to create pedagogical practices that engage students, providing them with ways of knowing that enhances their capacity to live fully and deeply” (22).

In *Hooked on the Art of Love: bell hooks and My Calling for Soul-Work* (2018), one of my published collections, I purposely focus on hooks' concept of art as a means for students *and* teachers “to live fully and deeply.” In *Hooked on the Art of Love*, I include contributors who cross borders of creative expression. Whether represented in the form of writing (personal essays, research/scholarship, or poetry)

and/or paintings, photography, as well as graphics—I conceptualized this collection of creatively gifted individuals to underscore and support hooks’ vision of love for human diversity. In the Introduction to the book, I state:

... I represent [her] longstanding love for personal, political, pedagogical, and artistic liberation.... In closing words of ‘Loving Justice,’ the final chapter of her book *Salvation: Black People and Love* (2001), hooks’ words personify the vision of creative soul-work exhibited in each contributors’ work(s) included in *Hooked on the Art of Love*. In *Salvation*, she also connects her inspired calling for social justice to the soulful voice of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. She affirms his vision of what it means ‘to create a beloved community.’ Conceptualizing this idea in my book project, I align its aim with the communal principles of love hooks proclaims. I interpret them as the essential values of labor for soul survival. (7-8)

The Soulful Art of Survival in *How We Made It Over*

I believe in my mind, heart, and soul that the writers in *How We Made It Over: Education in the Spirit of Love for Social Justice* represent the life-saving, liberatory power of an “ethic of love” that bell hooks demonstrates in *Salvation: Black People and Love*. She boldly says, “We cannot effectively resist domination if our efforts to create meaningful, lasting personal and social change are not grounded in a love ethic. Prophetically, *Salvation: Black People and Love* calls us to return to love” (xxiv). I believe the writers in *How We Made It Over* stand together on this visionary platform. I called together individuals willing boldly to speak truth to power. In unity and solidarity, we profoundly speak to life-saving power of an “ethic of love” in education for social justice. As contributors to this anthology, we demonstrate in our writings hope for justice and equality for all oppressed people.

Focused on “self-actualization” in the lives of teachers, students, and social activists, the writers in this book affirm varying approaches to education aimed to renew progressive struggles in resistance to all forms of systemic, institutionalized oppression and domination. In the words of bell hooks, these writers and I “form a *beloved community* where borders can be crossed and cultural hybridity celebrated.” Wholistically, we promote hooks’ idea of “self-actualization,” as a self-liberating, educational blue-print for the love of human survival. Together we call all who will read our writings to delve into the heart of what it means to be members of a *beloved*

community committed to love for social justice across this world. This “is where we must go from here.”

Once again, in *Salvation: Black People and Love*, bell hooks affirms the need for education rooted in love for social justice: “Even when we cannot change ongoing exploitation and domination, love gives life meaning, purpose, and direction. Doing the work of love, we ensure our survival and our triumph over the forces of evil and destruction... Love is our hope and our salvation” (xxiv). Having become “hooked on the art of love” as a teacher and student of bell hooks’ visionary writings, I note here that *How We Made It Over* also serves as a textual companion to *Black Male Outsider, a Memoir: Teaching as a Pro-Feminist Man* (2008), my first pedagogical case-study documenting my approach to teaching hooks’ writings and their transformative impact upon my students.

Considering the *self-actualizing* impact of bell hooks’ writings on what, how, and why I teach—without her revolutionary professorial legacy—my concept for *How We Made It Over* and my other published pedagogical works most likely would not have materialized. Once more in this groundbreaking collection of writings, its contributors and I work together to illustrate the liberating power of a *beloved community*. I believe our writings promote hooks’ belief that education for social justice “enables us to confront feelings of loss and restore our sense of connection. It teaches us how to create [love for] community ... meant to stand as a testament of hope.” I worked diligently with my contributors in *How We Made It Over* “to recover our collective awareness of the spirit of community that is always present when we are truly teaching and learning” (*Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope*, 2003).

Recalling My Educational [His]Story: “How I Got Over”

We need more autobiographical accounts of the first generation of [B]lack students to enter predominately white schools, colleges, and universities. Imagine what it is like to be taught by a teacher who does not believe you are fully human. Imagine what it is like to be taught by teachers who do believe that they are racially superior, and who feel that they would not have to lower themselves by teaching students whom they really believe are incapable of learning.

bell hooks, *Teaching Critical Thinking: Practical Wisdom*

Recalling my own history of “higher” education as a Black male student in a desegregated, PWI (Predominately White Institution) context—I never questioned why no BIPOC writers were taught in the literature courses I took. Learning how to make my Black-self invisible, I determined to pass every course with an “A” grade to prove my colonized intellectual ability. In truth, throughout my educational path up the “Ivory Tower” ladder, I willfully internalized Eurocentric ideas of the superiority of literature by white writers. I came to believe that studying writings by white writers would prepare me to become an excellent academic scholar and candidate for a well-deserved professorship—preferably in a PWI. With this goal in mind, I consciously remained blatantly ignorant about the literary significance and potential self-liberating power of BIPOC writers. Even to this day, remembering my educational history is emotionally challenging. In the wording of Black historian Dr. Carter G. Woodson (founder of the Association for the Study of African American Life and History), my past learning experiences in the field of literary studies in PWIs was about “mis-education.” Included in *The Mis-Education of the Negro* (reprint 2000) is a “Profile” about the life of Dr. Woodson written by Dr. Juwanza Kunjufu. He states:

Dr. Woodson had mastered all that Europeans could teach, but had a higher calling. His only desire was to return back to his community and teach empowerment. In 1915, Woodson founded the Association for the study of Negro Life. This organization is till alive almost a century later as the Association for the Study of Afro-American Life and History (ASALH). A year later, he created the *Journal of Negro History* and the *Negro History Bulletin* in 1937. In 1919, he became the Dean of the School of Liberal Arts at Howard University. (iv)

I never knew the history of Dr. Woodson until I first visited The Woodson African American Museum of Florida in 2017. Having accepted an invitation by its Executive Director, Terri Lipsey Scott to exhibit my artwork, I became intrigued not only by the name of the Museum but also by its mission: “[It] presents the voices of African American culture from the local, regional and national perspective. Its mission is to preserve, present, educate and celebrate Black history. Further to unite individuals as we strive toward equal justice for all.” As a Black boy growing up in a working-class family in Hot Springs, Arkansas during the 1960s before the beginning of my education in PWIs (Predominately White Institutions), I was taught

by Black teachers. They had no issues teaching all Black students. However, having recently read *The Long Shadow of Little Rock: A Memoir* by Daisy Bates, I learned about her life-story having been a longstanding activist for the eradication of segregated schooling in her hometown in Little Rock, Arkansas. As documented in her autobiography (as well as other historical news sources), on September 4, 1957—against the demand of then Orval Faubus the state’s governor barring the 9 Black students from attending the all-white, segregated Little Rock Central High School—U.S. President Dwight D. Eisenhower ordered federal troops to guard and protect those students entering it. Aligned with the governor’s racist dictatorialism in the state of Arkansas, it would not be until 1968 that segregated schooling would be outlawed in my hometown of Hot Springs. Clearly, the *Brown v. Board of Education* law passed in 1954 to end segregated schooling across the U.S. was profoundly opposed in my “home” state.

Even though growing up knowing nothing about the history of the Civil Rights Movement in the 1950s, I do recall news media recordings on TV about the struggle for social justice in the March on Washington on August 28, 1963. At this revolutionary event, Mahalia Jackson sang the song “How I Got Over” (its lyrics originally written by Black soloist Clara Ward.). Before the 250,000 people who joined together for this event promoting the struggle for “Jobs and Freedom,” Mahalia Jackson boldly sang the song. Learning the opening lyrics to the song and singing them in our family’s church, I would always remember the words of liberation “How I Got Over” represent. I cite some of the beginning ones here:

How I got Over? (How I got over)
How I got over? (How I got over)
You know my soul look back and wonder
How I made it over? (Oh yes)
How I got over? (How I got over)
How I made it over? (How I got over)
You know my soul look back and wonder
How I made it Over? (Oh yes) ...²

Also at the March, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. delivered his “I Have a Dream” speech. Even to this day, King’s vision of social justice in the U.S. holds all people accountable for its realization: “I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up

and live out the true meaning of its creed: We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men [and women] are created equal.”

Having embraced the song “How I Got Over” and Dr. King’s “I Have a Dream” speech in my mind growing up, I would come to connect their visionary words to what I would go on to learn from bell hooks about the meaning of “education as the practice of freedom.” Eventually, studying her writings about love for social justice, she taught me how to teach the histories *and* herstories of Black survival over the course of 400 years on this land. hooks’ revolutionary Black feminist teaching and writings for social justice would ultimately enable me to openly write about my calling to teach BIPOC literature. Particularly studying and teaching literature by Black authors over time would compel me to write about the life-saving power of bell hooks’ visionary standpoint toward ending all forms of systemic and institutionalized oppression. To this day, for many of the students I have taught and continue to teach across differences of race, gender, class, sexuality, culture, ability, and generation—“education for social justice in the Spirit of love” is about the practice of “self-actualization.”

In *Black Male Outsider*, I write about my first experience reading a book by a Black author. That book was *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (1984) by bell hooks. It would deeply impact my path toward “self-actualization.” In *Feminist Theory*, hooks writes about ways her Black working-class, marginalized family had to learn how to see, deal, and interact with every day experiences of white supremacy. In the book’s visionary preface, she states: “This mode of seeing reminded us of the existence of a whole universe, a main body made up of both margin and center. Our [Black family] survival depended on an ongoing public awareness of the separation between margin and center and an ongoing private acknowledgment that we were a necessary, vital part of that whole.”

Not only did writing for life-survival experienced by her family help me to remember where I came from and “How I Got Over?”—having grown up in a working-class Black family in the South as well—hooks’ writings compelled me not only to confront my educationally racialized marginalization and invisibility, but to put the broken pieces of my life back together again. Experiential narration (whether fictional and/or nonfictional) can be life-saving. Teaching and writing about it, I have remained focused on its self-liberating power grappling with the complexities of

struggles for Black “self-actualization.” I believe it to be the visionary path to an unwavering commitment to social justice for all the oppressed.

From Object to Subject

Teaching the “Self-Reflexive Power of Autocritography

[Autocritography] is a self-reflexive, self-consciously academic act that foregrounds aspects of the genre typically dissolved into authors’ always strategic self-portraits. Autocritography, in other words, is an account of individual, social, and institutional conditions that help to produce a scholar and, hence, his or her professional concerns. Although the intensity of investigation of any of these conditions may vary widely, their self-consciously interactive presence distinguishes autocritography from other forms of autobiographical recall.

Michael Awkward, *Scenes of Instruction, a Memoir*

As first represented in *Black Male Outsider* and more of my pedagogical writings focused on the personal, political, and professional (her)stories of bell hooks, I employ autocritography as a strategic genre to engage her critical resistance to systemic and institutionalized oppression. Moreover, I employ autocritography as a critical writing tool to enable students to utilize it as self-empowering, interpretive/analytical approach to literary studies. Through the lens of “first person” self-reflection—particularly related to the study and research of literature by BIPOC writers, I challenge students in my courses to comprehend the interconnection between the personal, political, professional, *and* the spiritual. Whether interpreting BIPOC poetry, plays, novels, short stories, memoirs, and/or any other form of creative writing—I strategically prompt students to write autocritographically. While this style of writing is not always comfortable related to the task of integrating self-reflection into scholarly research, first and foremost, it compels students to contemplate openly the complexity of human identities—across differences of race, gender, class, sexuality, culture, ability, and generation. Historically, in writings by BIPOC authors, the representation for self-survival is critically important to understand the dehumanizing effects of being the “other”.

I contend that writing and teaching through the lens of autocritography allows students to contemplate the power of its academic/intellectual freedom. In her

autocritographical, bell hooks clearly affirms the inclusion of personal narration in the evolution of her professional, activist, and journey in the Spirit of love for social justice. Her “first person” narrative standpoint is self-liberating for both student and teacher.

Having determined to interconnect hooks’ vision of “education as the practice of freedom” with Alice Walker’s visionary concept of the “womanist,” I labor to create a homeplace in the classroom to educate students for social justice. In this pedagogical homeplace, students are enabled to write, speak, and support human rights across socialized borders of difference. In this self-liberatory homeplace, the classroom acts as strategic representation of womanism that explicitly connects my pedagogical identity as a pro-Black feminist man to the revolutionary pathway to that of bell hooks. Thus, committed to teaching for freedom for the oppressed—across differences of race, gender, class, sexuality, culture, ability, *and* generation—I move with students across these differences to form community bridges for education for social justice. I compel them to theoretically envision and pragmatically act “for [the] survival and wholeness of entire people,” in the words of Alice Walker.

In closing, I reiterate my commitment to educating students for *wholeness* in mind, body, and the Spirit of love for social justice. I have whole-heartedly labored to create a classroom for empathetic “CHAT” (Community Healing through Activist Transformation). In this dialogical approach, I envision the classroom as a sacred homeplace that fully acknowledges, embraces, and communes with the Spirit of love unabashedly dealing with the complex dynamics of human existence. Closing the last chapter of *Salvation: Black People and Love*, bell hooks recalls Dr. King’s “visionary insight[fulness].” She states:

Martin Luther King offered a visionary insight when he stated: ‘Our goal is to create a beloved community, and this will require a qualitative change in our souls as well as a quantitative change in our lives.’ *The individuals who are part of that beloved community are already in our lives. We do not need to search for them. We can start where we are. We begin our journey with love, and love will always bring us back to where we started. Making the choice to love can heal our wounded spirits and our body politic. It is the deepest revolution, the turning away from the world as we know it, toward the world we must make if we are to*

be one with the planet—one healing heart giving and sustaining life. Love is our hope and our salvation. (Emphasis added, 225)

bell hooks' spiritually enriched interpretation of Dr. King's vision of "creat[ing] a beloved community" continues to inspire my calling to teach love for all humanity as a community bridge-building strategy.

Notes

¹*Caught Up in the Spirit! Teaching for Womanist Liberation* (2017); *Hooked on the Art of Love: bell hooks and My Calling for Soul-Work* (2018); *Building Womanist Coalitions: Writing and Teaching in the Spirit of Love* (2019); *Liberation for the Oppressed: Community Healing through Activist Transformation, A Call to CHAT* (2022); and *The Power and Freedom of Black Feminist and Womanist Pedagogy: Still Woke* (2023, Co-Editor Cheryl Rodriguez)

²Mahalia Jackson's version of the song is recorded on youtube.

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Part I

Transformed in Mind, Heart, and Soul

bell hooks writes in *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*:

In the weeks before the English Department at Oberlin College was about to decide whether or not I would be granted tenure, I was haunted by dreams of running away—of disappearing—yes, even of dying. These dreams were not a response to fear that I would not be granted tenure. They were a response to the reality that I *would* be granted tenure. I was afraid that I *would* be trapped in the academy forever.

Instead of feeling elated when I received tenure, I fell into a deep, life-threatening depression. Since everyone around me believed that I should be relieved, thrilled, proud, I felt ‘guilty’ about my ‘real’ feeling and could not share them with anyone.... When I shared my feelings with my sister (she’s a therapist), she reassured me that they were entirely appropriate because she said, ‘You never wanted to be a teacher. Since we were little, all you ever wanted to do was write.’ She was right. It was always assumed by everyone else that I would become a teacher. In the apartheid South, [B]lack girls from working-class backgrounds had three career choices. We could marry. We could work as maids. We could become school teachers.... From grade school on, I was destined to become a teacher.

But the dream of becoming a writer was always present within me. From childhood, I believed that I would teach *and* write.... Writing, I believed then, was all about private longing and person glory, but teaching was about service, giving bac to one’s community. For [B]lack folks teaching—educating—was fundamentally political because it was rooted in antiracist struggle. Indeed, my all-[B]lack grade schools became the location where I experienced learning as revolution. (1-2)

***Pro-Claiming bell hooks as My Revolutionary Teacher
And Black Feminist Mentor***
Gary L. Lemons

Liberation for the Oppressed and Hooked on the Art of Love

One day while editing a collection of writings by contributors to a book project I titled *Liberation for the Oppressed: Community Healing through Activist Transformation, A Call to CHAT* (2022), conceptualized through the University of South Florida Research Task Force Grant I had been awarded—I received a call from one of my former students Dr. LaToya Scott. She began by asking if I knew that bell hooks had passed away that day, December 15, 2021. Completely in a state of emotional shock, I told her I had not heard this overwhelmingly painful news. Though LaToya and I were both emotionally devastated, we were moved to recall all of the many ways bell hooks had impacted our lives as students, teachers, and scholars devoted to her visionary, radical legacy of Black feminist activism—in and beyond academia. Considering all that bell had taught me as my pedagogical and scholarly mentor over the course of my journey as a pro-Black feminist student and teacher, I dedicated *Liberation for the Oppressed* to her:

... Her soulful, Black feminist vision of love for the oppressed embodies the legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s enduring concept of a ‘beloved community.’ bell’s commitment to it manifests itself throughout this book. It speaks to her activist legacy of Black survival and self-determination to end racism—as well as all forms of systemic and institutionalized oppression. In *Writing Beyond Race: Living Theory and Practice*, bell says, ‘To engage the practice of love is to oppose domination in all its forms.’ Her words live on.... In love with ‘education as the practice of freedom,’ she will always be my teacher (v).

Moreover, having also been influenced by bell hooks’ love for creative artistry—particularly related to her writing as a poet, I began to write in the genre of “spoken-word”. Also, as an Africanist graphic artist, I also began to exhibit my artwork. Moreover, having been inspired by hooks’ love for art, in 2018 I published *Hooked on the Art of Love: bell hooks and My Calling for Soul-Work*. This project features

written and visual artistry by individuals employing different genres to showcase the power of their creative expression. To introduce the artworks in this collection connecting them to the soulful vision of art expressed by bell, I opened the book with these words to her:

To you bell—

As a student, scholar, teacher, and painter—at the heart *and* soul of my work is your vision of creative expression [for social justice]. Over the course of three decades—as I have continued to read, study, write about, and teach your writings—they would lead me on course to self-liberation. As a self-defined, Black feminist activist—you have taught me to put my life on the line (in the college classroom, in books I have written, and on canvases). I have learned from you to express my-*self* personally, politically, pedagogically, *and* spiritually. In these ways, I interpret your writings as *soul-work*—centered on the love for human rights and social justice. In *Hooked on the Art of Love*, I call together individuals whose written and visual expressivity works to personify your creative vision of “liberatory” being. In *my calling*, I have experienced the soulful power of art in human beings. *Transgressing* boundaries of separatism, we collectively demonstrate your idea of “education as the practice of freedom.” I have learned from you that *soul-work* is an essential form of self-activism. It’s “all about love.” Through your revolutionary artistry, I have embraced the artist within me with love—“from margin to center.”

Having read and been inspired by hooks’ writings in *Art on My Mind: Visual Politics*, I am still filled with her soulful words in its opening essay “Art on My Mind.” In it, bell says:

For more [B]lack folks to identify with art, we must shift conventional ways of thinking about the function of art. There must be a revolution in the way we see, the way we look.

Such a revolution would necessarily begin with diverse programs or critical education that would stimulate collective awareness that the creation and public.
(4)

From the publication of my first book *Black Male Outsider, a Memoir: Teaching as a Pro-Feminist Man* (2008), as well as those after it—to my most recently

published co-edited collection of writings in *The Power and Freedom of Black Feminist and Womanist Pedagogy: Still Woke* (2023) with Dr. Cheryl Rodriguez—I will always remember the path bell hooks guided me on to for critical self-reflection about the practice of “education in the Spirit of love for social justice.” In my concept for *How We Made It Over*, her visionary legacy of self-liberation lives on ... in my writing and teaching.

In *Hooked on the Art of Love: bell hooks and My Calling for Soul-Work*, I write an essay titled “Coming to Voice, Ridding Feelings of Shame: A (His)Story of Self-Liberation.” In it, I speak about my love for poetry as a creative path for inner-healing. I state: “I view spoken-word as a radical activist means to promote social justice. As a [B]lack man, not only having discovered its power for personal healing, but I also have begun to utilize it as a revolutionary path to self-recovery” (234). According to bell hooks in *Remembered Rapture: The Writer at Work* (1999):

Writing, whether confessional prose or poetry, was irrevocably linked in my mind with the effort to maintain well-being. I began writing poetry about the same time that I began keeping diaries. Poetry writing was radically different. Unlike confessional prose, once could use language in writing poetry to mask feelings, to hind the experiential reality leading one to create.... Poetry writing as creative process was intimately linked with the experience of transcendence. Unlike the diary writing, which became a space where I confronted pain, poetry was the way to move beyond it. (9-10)

My Inspired Calling to Write and Teach Love for Social Justice

I did not grow up writing poetry. Even as an English major, I did not take any classes in creative writing as an undergraduate and graduate student. However, upon coming to read bell hooks’ *Remembered Rapture: The Writer at Work*—particularly related to her love for writing poetry—I began to contemplate it as a creative pathway to begin my spiritual journey for self-love. Now, I employ poetry “as [a] creative process [that is] intimately linked with [my] experience of transcendence.” I employ spoken-word poetry to express my divine-calling to teach in the Spirit of love for social justice for all oppressed people—locally, nationally, and globally.

As I have written in the past, after having received a doctoral degree in “English” (literary studies) at New York University in the early 1990s, I would later become a certified, ordained minister—although in a fundamentalist, Christian Black church

(that I had grown up in). Over the years, while I have taught in both secular and religious institutions, I freed myself from the religious mis-education I received. According to bell hooks in *All About Love: New Visions*, “Usually, fundamentalists, be they Christian, Muslim, or any faith, shape and interpret religious thought to make it conform to and legitimize a conservative status quo. Fundamentalist thinkers use religion to justify supporting imperialism, militarism, sexism, racism, homophobia. They deny the unifying message of love that is at the heart of every major religious tradition” (73). Most importantly, in the evolution of what I believe to be my divine-calling to write and teach in the Spirit of love for social justice, I have sought to infuse my academic expertise in biblical literary studies with my comprehension of the liberating power of Black feminist-womanist theology.

For example, Kelly Brown Douglas (Dean of Episcopal Divinity School, Union Theological Seminary in New York City), also referencing Dr. King’s inspired approach for demonstrative support for Black civil rights, states in her book *The Black Christ* (1994, 2019) that—

... King questioned which God southern white clergy were following: ‘Who is their God? Is their God the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob’ And is their Savior the Savior who hung on the cross.... He did not understand how a person could claim to follow the Christian gospel and at the same time tacitly support racism. He strongly opposed a view of Christianity and Jesus that could lead to quietism in the face of injustice. (36)

Having read and studied writings by BIWC (Black Indigenous Women of Color) revolutionary theologians, I have come to know what it means to love human in a meta-physical, spiritual context—across race, culture, and religious differences. Promoting the self-liberating power of incorporating spirituality into how I teach BIPOC literature enables my students to confront systemic oppression and domination.

Engaging Black feminist and womanist approaches to spirituality linked to self-love in courses I teach allows me and my students to envision the classroom not only as a safe, but also as a critical location to envision a new world filled with love for all humanity. While bell hooks identifies as a “Black feminist” in her writings personally, politically, professionally, and spiritually—I tell my students that it is critically important to with Alice Walker’s concept of a “womanist.” In many of my

writings, I have referenced and written about the spiritual significance of the term's liberatory meanings related to love for social justice as defined by Walker in her book *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* (1983):

1... A [B]lack feminist or feminist of color ... Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male *and* female ... Not a separatist ... Traditionally universal, as in: 'Mama, why are we brown, pink, and yellow, and our cousins are white, beige, and black?' Ans.: 'Well, you know the colored race is just like a flower garden, with every color flower represented.' Traditionally capable, as in: 'Mama, I'm walking to Canada and I'm taking you and a bunch of other slaves with me.' Reply: 'It wouldn't be the first time.' 3. Loves music. Loves dance. Loves the moon. *Loves* the Spirit. Loves love and food and roundness. Loves struggle. *Loves* the Folk. Loves herself. *Regardless....* (xi—xii)

Expanding the term even more, according to Layli Phillips (Maparyan) in the Introduction to her book *The Womanist Reader* (2006):

Womanism is a social change perspective rooted in Black women's and other women of color's everyday experiences and everyday methods of problem solving in every day spaces, extended to the problem of ending all forms of oppression for all people, restoring the balance between people and the environment/nature, and reconciling human life with the spiritual dimension.... [W]omanism [has not] been limited to Black American contexts. Explorations of the womanist idea can be found in African, Australian (Aboriginal), Canadian, Caribbean/West Indian, Chinese/Taiwanese, European, Latino/Latina American, Native American Indian, and Southeast Asian/Indian cultural contexts, scholarly and otherwise.... By maintaining its autonomy outside established intellectual and political structures, womanism has preserved its accessibility to a broad spectrum of people from diverse walks of live.... (xx-xxi)

What stands out most about Phillips' concept of "womanism" as it relates Walker's definition of "womanist" is the universality of both concepts in a global context—across transnational differences of culture and ethnicity. In the conclusion of her essay "Spirituality in the Classroom: Some Womanist Reflections" in *Building Womanist Coalitions: Writing and Teaching in the Spirit of Love* (2019), Layli underscores womanism's "spiritualized perspective"—

Womanism is a spiritualized perspective on human life and social and ecological change. Moving beyond mere social movement, womanism activates spiritual movement, the movement of energy, the transformation of heart, minds, and consciousness. Womanist pedagogy brings this spirit into the classroom. Classroom environments that allow students to acknowledge their full dimensionality, including those aspects related to their spirituality and the spiritually-infused nature of all creation, are part of womanist pedagogical praxis. They are part of what many womanist pedagogues have uniquely to offer. Such womanist pedagogy does not overwrite other valuable forms of pedagogy, but it should not be excluded. . . . Spirituality is part of what makes humans whole beings and, particularly for those who believe or want to question these things, having opportunities in the classroom for unfettered self-expression is essential to their intellectual, emotional, and political development. (33-34).

Both Layli and Alice Walker represent liberatory ideas of womanism that act to unite “a broad spectrum of people from diverse walks of life” in solidarity for compassionate love committed to demonstrations “ending all forms of oppression for all people, restoring the balance between people and the environment/nature, and reconciling human life with the spiritual dimension.”

I purposefully interconnect womanist spirituality with the personal, political and professional. Intersecting Black feminist and womanist thought with my pedagogical approach to teaching BIPOC literature and biblical studies, I demonstrate my unwavering compassion for human existence across social, cultural, and religious differences “*regardless.*” Like bell hooks, I remain inspired by the compassion for humanity represented in the activist vision of social justice for the oppressed expressed in the writings/speeches by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. In *Salvation: Black People and Love*, bell hooks credits his passionate call for Black civil rights:

The Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. was a prophet of love preaching to the souls of [B]lack folks and our non white allies in struggles everywhere. His collection of sermons *Strength to Love* was first published in 1963. Later in 1976, in an address to a group of antiwar clergy, he stated: ‘When I speak of love I am not speaking of some sentimental and weak response. I am speaking of that force which all of the great religions have seen as the supreme unifying principle of life. Love is somehow the key that unlocks the door which leads to ultimate reality. This Hindu-Moslem-Christian-Jewish-Buddhist belief about ultimate

reality is beautifully summed up in the first epistle of Saint John: ‘Let us love one another, for love is God and everyone that loveth is both of God and knoweth God.’ Much of King’s focus on love as the fundamental principle that should guide the freedom struggle was directed toward upholding his belief in nonviolence. (6-7)

While hooks praises King for being “prophet of love,” she goes on to say that “he did not give as much attention to the issue of self-love and communal love among [B]lack people” (7). I agree with hooks’ point. I tell my students that “you cannot love somebody else until you begin loving yourself.” This is precisely the principle upon which I would acknowledge my divine-calling to write and teach BIPOC literature and biblical studies in the Spirit of love for social justice.

Note

¹She would also be the Editor for *The Womanist Idea* (2012, Layli Maparyan).

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Prophetic Voices: An Imaginary Interview
With bell hooks and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.
Gary L. Lemons

Originally published in *Hooked on the Art of Love*, I reclaim the commitment to the Spirit of love for revolutionary activism expressed by bell hooks and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Creatively, I have imagined them speaking to each other in liberating words of freedom for all the oppressed. In “Coming to Voice, Ridding Feelings of Shame,” I assert that—

Caught up in the creative sway of “bell hooks and autocritography” [a graduate course I first taught in 2015]—I would be led to create an imaginary dialogue between hooks and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Referencing the significance of his influence on her spiritual beliefs, she lifts him up as a revolutionary [B]lack male, spirit-filled leader, preacher, and teacher. For her, his calling for social, political, *and* spiritual freedom continues to represent a beacon of hope in this day and time of hopeless cynicism.

As hooks proclaims in *Writing Beyond Race: Living Theory and Practice* (2013), the radical, life-changing words of Dr. King still resonate in struggles for social justice and human rights for *all* people. I support my imagined dialogue between hooks and Dr. King with insightful wording from both of them, as unwavering advocates for critical consciousness and spiritual enlightenment. In the chapter titled “A Path Away From Race: On Spiritual Conversion,” she writes, “Martin Luther King’s divine calling was to preach. *He preached with an artistry, a divinely inspired creativity, that was wondrous to behold*” (Emphasis added 92).

During another semester in 2018 when I taught the graduate course “bell hooks and Autocritography,” I shared excerpts from my created dialogue with my students to remember his life-saving message for global-healing (50 years after Dr. King was assassinated in 1968).

In *Liberation for the Oppressed: Community Healing Through Activist Transformation, A Call to “CHAT”* (2022)—I write a chapter titled “Surviving the

Trauma of Racism: Teaching and Writing for Self-Recovery.” Here, I include closing sections from the chapter focused on bell hooks’ reclamation of Dr. King’s vision of a “beloved community” in her book *Killing Rage: Ending Racism* (1995)—

“In the final chapter of her visionary, soulful book ... ‘Beloved Community: A World *Without* Racism,’ bell hooks writes:

Like all *beloved communities* we affirm our differences. It is this generous spirit of affirmation that gives us the courage to challenge one another, to work through misunderstandings, especially those that have to do with race and racism. In a *beloved community* solidarity and trust are grounded in profound commitment to a shared vision. Those of us who are always anti-racist long for a world in which everyone can form a *beloved community* where borders can be crossed and cultural hybridity celebrated. Anyone can begin to live in an anti-racist world. If that longing guides our vision and our actions, the new culture will be born and anti-racist communities of resistance will emerge everywhere. That is where we must go from here.” (272)

As she references ‘we’ and ‘us’ more than once, she unequivocally articulates that in ‘all *beloved communities*’ there must be an ‘affirm[ation] of our differences.’ In this contextual lens, it means that the ‘we’ she credits must be ‘[courageous enough] to challenge one another, to work through misunderstandings, especially those that have to do with race and racism.’ Thus, the ‘we’ and the ‘us’ hooks refers to must include all folk willing to engage what most likely will be complex, complicated, difficult, and challenging conversations about what it means for the ‘us’ who are anti-racist—‘always long[ing] to live in an anti-racist world.’ In other words, this means ‘we’ must put our words into action crossing boundaries and embracing ‘cultural hybridity.’ In this celebratory movement toward uplifting joy for difference in mind, body, and soul—‘Anyone can begin to live in an anti-racist world.’ bell hooks grounds this idea in Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s vision of a world void of racism.

Living in an Anti-Racist World—‘The Life We Save is Our Own’

While bell hooks’ book *Killing Rage: Ending Racism* was published over two decades ago—considering the violent and literally deadening implications of racism and white supremacy in the U.S. in this contemporary moment—there remains the revolutionary need for activist demonstration and critical dialogue for social justice

to end racism. In hooks' thoughtful insight into what it means to 'live in an anti-racist world,' she strategically connects the personal to the political. In line with Dr. King's revolutionary vision of a 'beloved community' and the insightful comprehension of it as envisioned by hooks, I imagine its realization in the contributors' voices in *Liberation for the Oppressed*. I believe their writings will stand the test of time as they collectively advocate anti-racist activism for social justice. The writings in this book act to interconnect the personal to political. They also show how all people committed to social justice can employ their professional work in community partnership for labor toward building a beloved community. Moreover, the contributors' works in this book not only expose the real deadly effects of racism, but they also call out the hurtful outcomes of sexism, classism, homophobia, and ableism interconnected to it. In solidarity, our voices actively re-enforce what it means to write, to live, and to act for social justice. As Dr. King envisioned, 'Our goal is to create a beloved community and this will require a qualitative change in our souls as well as a qualitative change in our lives'" (www.quotetab.com). (110-111)

bell hooks and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Sharing Words of Wisdom¹

Gary: To begin this dialogue, I begin by asking you, bell, to share with Dr. King what you write about him in your book *Writing Beyond Race*. In the chapter "A Path Away from Race: On Spiritual Conversion"—in which you focus on Dr. King, you speak about what you believe lies at the core of his "divine calling... to preach."

bell: "[Dr. King, you preach] with an artistry, a divinely inspired creativity, that [is] wondrous to behold. [You can] call masses of people to hear the word of God: the holy, holy, holy spirit emanating from [you is] awesome. [You are] a prophetic witness. Able to convert listeners, [you] not only [make] it possible for them to hear sacred teachings, [you invite] them to open their hearts and be transformed. [I know] one of [your] favorite scriptures, taken from the book of Romans, admonished believers, telling them: 'Be not conformed to this world but be ye transformed by the renewal of your mind that you may know what the will of [G]od is'" [Romans 12:2]. (92)

Gary: bell, would you mind summarizing for what you have just said to Dr. King?

bell: “[Dr. King, you, are] a [p]rophet, preacher, man of God, seeker on the path of righteousness and right action. [I think you meditate] often this scripture because [you seek] direct connection with the divine. [You know you are constantly] in need of divine guidance. Willing to critically reflect, grow, and change, [you want] only to do God’s will.” (92-93)

Dr. King: “The function of education is to teach one to think intensively and to think critically. Intelligence plus character—that is the goal of true education.”

Gary: Dr. King, you and bell hooks—who is a noted black feminist teacher—share similar ideas about education for critical consciousness.

bell: “In my classrooms, I do not expect students to take any risks that I would not take, to share in any way that I would not share. When professors bring narratives of their experiences into classroom discussions it eliminates the possibility that we can function as all-knowing, silent interrogators. It is often productive if professors take the first risk, linking confessional narratives to academic discourses so as to show how experience can illuminate and enhance our understanding of academic material. But most professors must practice being vulnerable in the classroom, being wholly present in mind, body, and spirit.” (*Teaching to Transgress* 21)

Gary: Dr. King, you and bell agree on the idea of self-reflection as an important tool that “[functions for teachers to enable students] to think intensively and to think critically.” What I hear you both saying is that “true education” for students is about connecting who they want to become—inside and outside the classroom—with the power of “self-actualization.” Students need “to think critically” about issues of human rights and social justice that our black ancestors began to fight for in this land for before you were born.

Dr. King: “Nothing in all the world is more dangerous than sincere ignorance and conscientious stupidity... Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that.”

Gary: It seems like you and bell are saying that we are all living in the darkness of this day. It’s driving all colored folks out of this original, skin-color-filled land? We all need to see the light of our African-rooted selves? The answer to “making this country great again” is not about hating folks of color? I believe you both are right: “Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that.” But when racist folk at the top

are in love with white-light only, won't that lead us all into the darkness of white supremacist hatred?

Dr. King: "In the End, we will remember not the words of our enemies, but the silence of our friends... The time is always right to do what is right... Faith is taking the first step even when you don't see the whole staircase."

Gary: Would the two of you agree that many black folks high up in the "ivory tower" believe intellectual power continues to be our single path to liberation as a people, while we still struggle to climb every step up its slipp'ry staircase? We have a lot of brothers and sisters with PhD's. But what does that really mean? That we passed the test of white racial assimilation? Many [B]lack folks in institutions of higher learning still wear what Paul Lawrence Dunbar called the "mask that grins and lies." Dr. King, I am not trying to be disrespectful, but what does "faith" have to do with anybody moving up on the "staircase" of success? Are you both saying that "faith" is about embracing radical ideas of education for self-transformation in order to be liberated? That not only [B]lack folk—but all folk—must take one self-reflective step at a time up that visionary staircase for *higher* education? One thing I do know is that [B]lacks in the U.S. must remember the African mother-land where we came from and where all life was first created. Dr. King, what do you think about bell saying that education for liberation should lead us on a journey of self-actualization that is about obtaining wholeness through love—in mind, body, and Spirit?

Dr. King: "We must not stop with the cultivation of a tough mind. The gospel also demands a tender heart. Toughmindedness without tenderheartedness is cold and detached... What is more tragic than to see a person who has risen to the disciplined heights of toughmindedness but has at the same time sunk to the passionless depths of hardheartedness?"

The hardhearted person never truly loves... No outpouring of love links [this person] with the mainland of humanity... We as [African Americans] must bring together toughmindedness and tenderheartedness if we are to move creatively toward the goal of freedom and justice." (*A Gift of Love*, 5, 7)

Gary: Once again, bell, in your book *Writing Beyond Race* you not only say that Dr. King's "vision of living our lives based on a love ethic is the philosophy of being and becoming that could heal our world today"—you also say that he is "[a] prophetic witness for peace, an apostle of love [that you have] given us the map...that

[his] spirit lights the way, leading to the truth that love in action is the spiritual path that liberates” (97).

Dr. King, in response to bell’s compelling thoughts about you being an “apostle of love ... leading [us] to the truth that love in action is the spiritual path that liberates,” I must say she prompts me to reflect upon the biblical mission of Jesus when he says in the book of John 8:12: “I am the light of the world. If you follow me, you won’t have to walk in darkness, because you will have the light that leads to life” (*New Living Translation*). bell, your inspirational *words* about Dr. King’s supernatural giftedness also reminds me of Jesus’ statement about a prophet, an apostle, a teacher, a performer of miracles, and healing—related to the superlative value of love. Jesus says,

Is everyone an apostle? Of course not. Is everyone a prophet? No. Are all teachers? Does everyone have the gift of healing? Of course not... [Let] me tell you about something else that is better than any of them! If I could speak in any language in heaven or on earth but didn’t love others, I would only be making meaningless noise like a loud gong or a clanging cymbal. If I had the gift of prophecy, and if I knew all the mysteries of the future and knew everything about everything, but didn’t love others, what good would I be? And if I had the gift of faith so that I could speak to a mountain and make it move, without love I would be no good to anybody. If I gave everything I have to the poor and even sacrificed my body, I could boast about it, but if I didn’t love other, I would be of no value whatsoever. (*New Living Translation*, 1 Cor. 12.29-13.3)

Actually, Dr. King, I believe bell’s image of you as “an apostle of love” is a contemporary model of at the activist representation of love Jesus embodied. Do you think your vision of love as spiritually healing could lead us toward a new Civil Rights Movement—particularly when you hold onto the notion that “[I]ove is the only force capable of transforming an enemy into a friend?” This is exactly what From Jesus said in the biblical book of Matthew. I repeat his statement here:

You have heard that the law of Moses says, “Love your neighbor” and hate your enemy. But I say, love your enemies! Pray for those who persecute you! In that way, you will be acting as true children of your Father in heaven. For he gives his sunlight to both the evil and the good, and he sends rain on the just and on the unjust, too. If you love only those who love you, what good is that? Even

corrupt tax collectors do that much. If you are kind only to your friends, how are you different from anyone else? (Matt. 5.43-47)

To be honest with you, Dr. King, and bell, I find it very difficult to love someone who I know quite well hates me—especially related to the ideology of white supremacy. So, Dr. King, share more with us how you believe love figures into becoming friends with someone who is publicly known for the hatred of [B]lack/people of color—for example a KKK member. Do you mean that as [B]lack/folk of color we have to be friends with white people who hate us for the color of our skin and where we come from? Before you answer, bell has something she would like to say.

bell: “Like many Americans [Dr. King,] I read your slim volume of sermons *Strength to Love* [when it was] first published in 1963, to give me hope. By then it was evident that [your] vision that love was the most constructive way to create positive social change benefiting everyone was changing our culture. Motivated by our belief in a love ethic, masses of Americans worked in the late sixties and early seventies to unlearn the logic of domination and dominate culture. While militant Black power struggle certainly helped bring about important social reform it also produced a culture of despair because the support for violence and imperialism was a central component of that agenda. [Your] insistence on love had provided folk an enduring message of hope.” (*Writing Beyond Race* 96)

Gary: Interestingly enough, as bell points out, it was not until “the late sixties and early seventies [that Americans really began] to unlearn the logic of domination and dominate culture.” As I have written, it was not until the late sixties in my hometown (Hot Springs, Arkansas) that segregated schooling came to an end—a decade after federal troops in 1959 literally had to escort nine [B]lack students into Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas. The troops had to protect them against the racist protest of angry white segregationists, including Orval Faubus (the state’s governor at the time). My experience attending an integrated school with white students was, indeed, an eye-opening lesson in unlearn[ing] the logic of [racist] domination and [white] dominate culture.” Schooling with white students and teachers—even though it did involve for me personal moments of “despair”—I learned not to give power to white supremacist racial hatred by viewing all white folk as the *enemy*. bell believes, Dr. King, that you “[understand] that many unenlightened white folks feared that if [B]lack people gained greater power [we] would violently retaliate

against those who had oppressed [us], hence [your] constant insistence that [B]lack people love our enemies” (95). I absolutely agree with the two of you that “[an] insistence on love [provides all] folk an enduring message of hope.”

Dr. King, you have said that, “Life's most persistent and urgent question is, 'What are you doing for others?'" Related to bell's idea that your “message of hope” is grounded in your “insistence on love” as a way to bring folk together, you have said before that “[t]he ultimate measure of a man [or woman] is not where he [or she] stands in moments of comfort and convenience, but where he [or she] stands at times of challenge and controversy.” So what I hear you telling us is exactly what Jesus told the people: loving one's enemy is not about personal ease. Are you and bell saying that right now—considering the separatist and wall-building ideology that is dominating the mindset of the current U.S. white male leader—this is not a time just for folk to sit in “comfort and convenience” and that in this “[time] of challenge and controversy,” all of us should move and act out our stand for social justice and human rights for all people? bell, please respond first as you have commented in *Writing Beyond Race*:

bell: “Just as I turned to [your] writing [Dr. King] in my early twenties to renew my spirit, more than twenty years later I returned to this work as I experience renewed spiritual awakening, an ever-growing awareness of the transformative power of love. Like [you], I had been undergoing a conversion, not in the conventional sense of a defining moment of change, but rather conversion as a process, an ongoing project. As I studied and wrote about ending domination in all its forms it became clearer and clearer that politics rooted in a love ethic could produce lasting meaningful social change. When I traveled the nation asking folk what enabled them to be courageous in struggling for freedom—whether working to end domination of race, gender, sexuality, class, or religion—the response was love.” (97)

Dr. King: Once again, I will repeat my life-changing words (as I spoke them on Aug. 28, 1963, in my "I Have a Dream" speech on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C.)—

We must accept finite disappointment, but never lose infinite hope... I have a dream that one day [as you all may recall in] the state of Alabama, whose governor's lips [were] dripping with the words of interposition and nullification, [that the time you are living in] will be transformed into a situation where little

[B]lack boys and [B]lack girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls and walk together as sisters and brothers... I say to you today, my friends, that in spite of the difficulties and frustrations of the moment, I still have a dream.

Gary: Dr. King, is there anything else you would like to add to these words of hope-filled inspiration?

Dr. King: On May 5, 1966—upon accepting the Planned Parenthood Federation of America’s Margaret Sanger Award—I spoke these words: "Together we can and should unite our strength for the wise preservation, not of races in general, but of the one race we all constitute—the human race."

Gary: You and bell think so much alike in your call to *let love lead* us in the spiritual path toward healing and human(e) solidarity. Dr. King, I believe bell echoes exactly your vision of struggle for unity and wholeness—eradicating ideas of separatism as she restates your call for global alliance against domination:

bell: “Aware of the need to end domination globally [in the past, Dr. King, you] cautioned: ‘In an effort to achieve freedom in America, Asia, and Africa we must not try to leap from a position of disadvantage to one of advantage, thus subverting justice. We must seek democracy and not the substitution of one tyranny for another... God is not interested merely in the freedom of [B]lack men, and brown men, and yellow men; God is interested in the freedom of the whole human race.’ [Your] vision of redemptive love [holds] the promise that both oppressor and oppressed could recover from the wounds of dehumanization.” (*Writing Beyond Race* 96)

Gary: Dr. King, while I find your expression of God’s vision of “freedom of the whole human race” inspiring, I have always been drawn to bell’s ideas of “redemptive love” based on her inspirited view point as [B]lack feminist. bell, your critique of patriarchal oppression and domination as always brought to our attention the intersecting relationship between race, gender, class, and sexuality. While you have spoken repeatedly about the power of alliance-building across differences, you have specifically stated that the promise of a radical movement for [B]lack political solidarity will only come when black men begin to imagine ourselves free from “male”-centered thinking. In *We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity* you say, “Black men who stand against sexism, who choose to be feminist in their thinking

and action model a healing masculinity for all [B]lack men” (132). I think this is true for all men—white and of color—who support God’s inclusive vision of love for social justice embracing *all* folk. As you say, Dr. King, “[W]e must not try to leap from a position of disadvantage to one of advantage, thus subverting justice [and that we] must seek democracy and not the substitution of one tyranny for another.”

bell, just for a moment I want to return to a comment about “despair” you made earlier connected to the continuation of Black folk’s protests for social justice in the 1960s and ‘70s that reaffirms Dr. King’s point here. You state in *Writing Beyond Race* that—“While militant [B]lack power struggle certainly helped bring about important social reforms it also produced a culture of despair because the support for violence and imperialism was a central component of that agenda” (96). While it was important for [B]lacks to speak and act out against the perpetuation of white supremacy, as you have stated Dr. King that it was not in our best interest to promote violence against violence. In this regard, I want to underscore the message, bell, that you speak to [B]lack men in *We Real Cool*, particularly related to issues of black male power—

bell: “Visions of [B]lack men as healers, able to nurture life, are the representations of black masculinity that ‘keep it real’ for they offer the vision of what is possible, a hint of the spirit that is alive and well in the [B]lack male collective being, ready to be reborn. They take our minds and hearts away from images of [B]lack males who have known soul murder and speak to us of resurrection, of a word in the making where all is well with [B]lack men’s souls, where they are free and made whole.” (132)

Gary: bell, your words to [B]lack men—like those, Dr. King, you speak to all humankind—are indeed messages of hope, healing, and restoration. It is so true that “images of black males who have known soul murder” continue to confront our communities daily in the physical (mis)treatment of our bodies—inextricably linked the life-execution of our souls under murdering of white supremacy. Yet, bell, you say that our souls in the “visions of [B]lack men as healers, able to nurture life [that which] is possible, a hint of the spirit that is alive and well in the black male collective being, ready to be reborn.” In the Spirit of love we “are [set] free and male whole.”

bell, I say to you and Dr. King this conversation with the two of you is personally life transforming. Thinking about that “soul murder” as it relates to masculinist notions of black male power is a form of [B]lack phallic enslavement that keeps us bound to patriarchal ideas of manhood. Phallic authority will never be a loving representation of black manhood, especially when [B]lack males desire it as the only viable expression of our manhood in a culture of white supremacist heterosexism. Having embraced your loved-based, spiritual visions of [B]lack/human liberation, I can boldly say that I am a [B]lack man committed to speaking out in coalitional struggles for social justice in support of all men *and* women—especially in the U.S.—who are “x’d-out” of the “American dream”. bell, you write in your book *Talking Back: Thinking, Thinking Black* that “[s]peaking becomes both a way to engage in active self-transformation and a rite of passage where one moves from object to being subject. Only as subjects can we speak. As objects, we remain voiceless—our beings defined and interpreted by others” (12).

I must say, Dr. King, that your continued boldness in actively voicing resistance to oppressive power is liberatory. In *Writing Beyond Race*, bell pointedly writes about your decision to speak against the U.S. in war with Vietnam. With surety, she says, “It took many days and nights of prayer and soul searching, [asking yourself] ‘how can I say I worship a god of love and support war’ to transform [your] consciousness and [your] actions” (94). bell, you further reference Dr. King’s speech “A Time to Break Silence” delivered in 1967 stating that “[c]onfessing that it [could not have been an] easy decision to stand against the nation and oppose war” (94). As I read these words, Dr. King, I found your courage to speak out amazingly inspiring. You said, as bell quotes: “Some of us who have already begun to break the silence of the night have found that the calling to speak is often a vocation of agony, but we must speak” (94). Moreover, underscoring your belief in the life-saving power of love, she cites words from another one of your speeches titled “Where Do We Go from Here?”

Dr. King: “I have decided to love. If you are seeking the highest good, I think you can find it through love. And the beautiful thing is that we are moving against wrong when we do it, because John was right, God is love. [S/he] who hates does not know God, but [s/]he who has love has the key that unlocks the door to the meaning of ultimate reality.” (95)

Gary: Dr. King, as we conclude this inspirational dialogue between you and bell, I want to re-emphasize how clearly her message of [B]lack male soul-resurrection is integrally connected to your vision of love devoted to the liberation of the entire human race. In fact, in *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope*, bell talks about your having “imagined a ‘beloved community,’ conceptualizing a world where people would bond on the basis of shared humanness.” bell says that “[your] vision remains... [that] you “taught that the simple act of coming together would strengthen community... that unlearning racism would require a change in both thinking and action...” (35-36). Would you repeat once again your thought about this?

Dr. King: "Together we can and should unite our strength for the wise preservation, not of races in general, but of the one race we all constitute—the human race."

Gary: In closing, I thank you and bell hooks for this dialogue. In this day and time of trouble, we needed to hear your voice continuing to “talk back” against the fatal ills of domination and separatism in the U.S.

Looking B[l]ack: What’s Love Got to Do with It?

In hindsight, every time I drive on the street in Tampa, Florida named after Dr. King, I think about the deep impression he made on the life and writings of bell hooks related to her vision of art and love. Inviting readers of *Writing Beyond Race* to contemplate the power of love as the critical motivating force in struggles for social justice, she remarks:

Contemplating the factors that lead people to struggle for justice and strive to build community has led me to think critically about the place of love. Whether the issue is ending racism, sexism, homophobia, or class elitism, when I interview folks about what leads them to overcome dominator thinking and action they invariably speak about love, about learning acceptance of difference from someone they care about. (1)

However, for me, her comments about Dr. King’s impact upon her keeps his voice alive in my mind, body, *and* soul. It is not my chance or luck that I would imagine speaking to Dr. King—in light of hooks’ heartfelt thoughts about his messages of hope. Concluding her chapter “A Path Away From Race: On Spiritual Conversation,” her last words about him are inspirationally healing and radically liberatory:

King's insistence on love ha[s] provided folk an enduring message of hope...Just as I turned to King's writing in my early twenties to renew my spirit, more than twenty years later I returned to this work as I experienced renewed spiritual awakening, an ever growing awareness of the transformative power of love. Like King, I had been undergoing a conversion, not in the conventional sense of a defining moment of change, but rather conversion as a process, an ongoing project. As I studied and wrote about ending domination in all its forms it became clearer and clearer that politics rooted in a love ethic could produce lasting meaningful social change. When I traveled the nation asking folk what enable them to be courageous in struggling for freedom—whether working to end domination of race, gender, sexuality, class, or religion—the response was love...A prophetic witness for peace, an apostle of love, Martin Luther King has given us the map. His spirit lights the way, leading to the truth that love in action is the spiritual path that liberates. (97)

Note

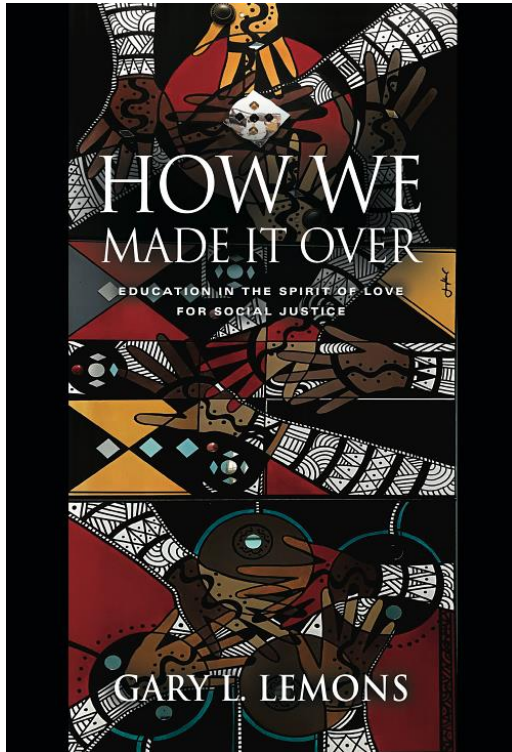
¹In this “imaginary dialogue,” I selected quotes by Dr. King from KEEPINSPIRING.ME, “123 of the Most Powerful Martin Luther King Jr. Quotes Ever.”

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