LOVING BELL HOOKS
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If I were really asked to define myself, I wouldn’t start with race; I wouldn’t start with blackness; I wouldn’t start with gender; I wouldn’t start with feminism. I would start with stripping down to what fundamentally informs my life, which is that I’m a seeker on the path. I think of feminism, and I think of anti-racist struggles as part of it. But where I stand spiritually is, steadfastly, on a path about love.

My “Loving bell hooks” personal reflection was inspired by my re-reading of her inspirational, hopeful book, ALL ABOUT LOVE: NEW VISIONS, published in 2000, in which she quotes from Thomas Merton: “Love is our true destiny. We do not find the meaning of life by ourselves alone---we find it with another.” Perhaps her most cogent testimony about the power of love and its healing and political ingredients is this: “Love redeems. Despite all the lovelessness that surrounds us, nothing has been able to block our longing for love, the intensity of our yearning. The understanding that love redeems appears to be a resilient aspect of the heart’s knowledge. The healing power of redemptive love lures us and calls us toward the possibility of healing . . . Like all great mysteries, we are all mysteriously called to love no matter the conditions of our lives, the degree of our depravity or despair. The persistence of this call gives us reason to hope. Without hope, we cannot return to love . . . It is a practice of positive thinking. . .living in a permanent state of hopefulness, renews the spirit.

I am also inspired by Professor Gary Lemons’ loving, heartwarming, compelling anthology, HOOKED ON THE ART OF LOVE: BELL HOOKS AND MY CALLING OR SOUL-WORK in which he and his contributors make visible the revolutionary artistry of bell hooks: “As a black male teacher, scholar and artist---whose commitment to social justice and human rights is rooted in the groundbreaking works of hooks, I am a witness to the liberatory power of her creative giftedness. Over the course of time, I have been led, in her words and works, to embark upon a journey for “expressive creativity of a soul struggling to self-actualize. . . .In line with hooks’ life-changing vision of a beloved community, I have conceptualized this book as a radical model for self-liberation. Thus, in loving communion with hooks, together the contributors and I actively labor toward re-envisioning 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.” My observations of the book attempt to capture its indebtedness and reverence for her love-talk: “Without question, Lemons, in and out of the classroom, has been for several decades, bell hooks most loving, insightful, and passionate witness to the extraordinary power of her feminist vision for self-healing and spiritual/political liberation. Lemons’ love song for bell . . . is compelling soul-work. . . it is also a love feast for all of us who believe in freedom and justice and hope.”

In my own “praise-song” to bell, I argue that she has been the most unrelenting, hard-hitting, caring, passionate Black feminist voice with respect to the ravages of white supremacist patriarchy and toxic
masculinity. There were a particular set of circumstances that help to illuminate my forty-year friendship/comradeship with her. It began in 1981, at the infamous third annual National Women’s Studies Association in Storrs, Connecticut whose theme was “Women Respond to Racism” during which Audre Lorde delivered her much anthologized speech, “The Uses of Anger: Women Responding to Racism.” This NWSA conference signaled a major political shift in the field of Women’s Studies with respect to women of color theorizing. My encounter with Gloria Watkins/bell hooks was casual and serendipitous on the first day. Though I had no idea who she was, I learned that she was born in 1952 (six years before me) in Hopkinsville, Kentucky. We had similar academic profiles. She obtained degrees in English from Stanford University, the University of Wisconsin and UC/Santa Cruz. My degrees in English were from Spelman College, Atlanta University, and eventually the PhD in American Studies from Emory University where I focused on literature and history. We were also raised in the Jim and Jane Crow South. She was promoting her first book, AIN’T I A WOMAN: BLACK WOMEN IN FEMINISM, and we literally bumped into each other on the university campus. Because she didn’t have a dormitory room, I invited her to share my room. We talked all night and that was the beginning of the most important political friendship of my personal and professional life. It was also a loving partnership. It would have been impossible for us to have imagined over the next several days at the conference that her feminist books (which were to grow to over 30) would help to transform the field of Women’s Studies or that we would stay bonded forever. This friendship-in-the-making with Gloria/bell occurred the same year I established the Women’s Research & Resource at Spelman College, and she became over the years our most frequent guest and spoke mostly without honoraria. During her visits she developed a loving connection with our students, many of whom remember those days with fondness as they reflect upon her impact in the aftermath of her untimely death this past December at the age of 69. After leaving Storrs, we continued to delve deeply into Black feminist matters via long telephone calls and during my frequent visits to her small apartment at Yale University where she had a five-year non-tenure track appointment in African American Studies. We would talk for hours and days about the joys and lessons of feminism and the reluctance of too many Black women to embrace its radical politics or its potential for transforming Black communities around patriarchal norms and values. We wanted our sisters (and brothers) to love feminism as a healing and critical political project that might address what ailed us as a nation and community.

In my autographed copy of one of her memoirs, WOUNDS OF PASSION, she wrote: “You were there--you know what my life was like,” and that inscription in 1997 persuaded me to one day find the courage to write about my life and the lives of other Black women who had shaped the development of feminist theory as well as the women’s liberation movement. in the U.S. during the 70s and 80s. When I read the preface to WOUNDS OF PASSION which she wrote because she wanted to document the circumstances that prepared her to become a prolific writer, I encountered some truths which resonated with my own experience of being a Black girl growing up in Memphis, Tennessee in the 50s. “From age ten on I dreamed of becoming a writer. Books were my ecstasy and just as I wanted to curl up in my tiny attic room bed and be transported far away (which I also did reading about Russian dancers), I dreamed of writing words that would offer someone else the same pleasure. The grown-ups believed too much reading endangered a young girl’s future. Many of us were told early on that men don’t like smart women” (p. ).

It is imperative that young women, in particular, hear from us and read our books. WORDS OF FIRE: AN ANTHOLOGY OF AFRICAN AMERICAN FEMINIST THOUGHT is the most visible testimony to my
comradeship with Gloria/bell. These narratives might provide clearer road maps, fewer detours, more carefully charted destinations to the creation of a better, more loving world. For me, this has been a deeply satisfying journey—-from the quiet, shy, loner/bookworm to the feminist intellectual committed to sharing different stories about two of the most important liberation struggles of the 20th century—the civil rights and women’s movements. bell hooks was certainly one of the most influential architects with respect to gendering the civil rights movement and challenging the whiteness of the mainstream women’s movement. As a professor, writer, and critic, she has been one of the most cogent and passionate witnesses in her dissection of U.S. culture, which she describes as white supremacist capitalist patriarchy. Her articulation of a “love-ethic” in three books, ALL ABOUT LOVE: NEW VISIONS, SALVATION: BLACK PEOPLE AND LOVE, and COMMUNION: THE FEMALE SEARCH FOR LOVE, gestures toward a powerful antidote to the nation’s “lovelessness.”

My final note to Gloria/bell is simple: “I have loved your relentless efforts, mainly with pen and speech, to imagine a different world and remain hopeful. I am also hopeful about the vitality of feminism when I see young Black girls writing open letters to rap artists about the toxic, misogynistic nature of too many of their images. I am ecstatic when I see feminist and queer Black women catalyzing a Black Lives Matter Movement in the aftermath of Ferguson. I am joyful when I see women in the streets of Italy, Egypt, the Ivory Coast and Libya risking their lives in the pursuit of their own liberation. I smile when I ponder the example of my own mother, the feminist who raised me and my two sisters. I am exhilarated by the memory of our fallen sisters whose struggles for a better world are now more legendary: Sojourner Truth Anna Julia Cooper, Ida Wells Barnett, Lorraine Hansberry, Pauli Murray, Coretta Scott King, Audre Lorde, June Jordan. I am grateful for the feminist work of the African American Policy Forum, founded by Professors Kimberle Crenshaw and Luke Harris, whose interventions in male-centered racial justice initiatives need our continued support, especially around recent vicious right-wing attacks on critical race theory. I love you Gloria/bell.