

bell hooks

KILLING RACE

ENDING RACISM

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LOVING BLACKNESS AS POLITICAL RESISTANCE

We have to change our own mind.... We've got to change our own minds about each other. We have to see each other with new eyes. We have to come together with warmth....

—MALCOLM X

The course I teach on black women writers is a consistent favorite among students. The last semester that I taught this course we had the usual passionate discussion of Nella Larsen's novel *Passing*. When I suggested to the class that Clare, the black woman who has passed for white all her adult life and marries a wealthy white businessman with whom she has a child, is the only character in the novel who truly desires "blackness" and that it is this desire that leads to her murder, no one responded. Clare boldly declares that she would rather live for the rest of her life as a poor black woman in Harlem than as a rich white matron downtown. I asked the class to consider the possibility that to love blackness is dangerous in a white supremacist culture—so threatening, so serious a breach in the fabric of the social order, that death is the punishment. It became painfully ob-

vious by the lack of response that this group of diverse students (many of them black people) were more interested in discussing the desire of black folks to be white, indeed were fixated on this issue. So much so that they could not even take seriously a critical discussion about "loving blackness."

They wanted to talk about black self-hatred, to hear one another confess (especially students of color) in eloquent narratives about the myriad ways they had tried to attain whiteness, if only symbolically. They gave graphic details about the ways they attempted to appear "white" by talking a certain way, wearing certain clothing, and even choosing specific groups of white friends. Blond white students seized the opportunity to testify that they had never realized racism had this impact upon the psyches of people of color until they started hanging out with black friends, taking courses in black studies, or reading Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*. And better yet, they never realized there was such a thing as "white privilege" until they developed non-white connections.

I left this class of more than forty students, most of whom see themselves as radical and progressive, feeling as though I had witnessed a ritualistic demonstration of the impact white supremacy has on our collective psyches, shaping the nature of everyday life, how we talk, walk, eat, dream, and look at one another. The most frightening aspect of this ritual was the extent to which their fascination with the topic of black self-hatred was so intense that it silenced any constructive discussion about loving blackness. Most folks in this society do not want to openly admit that "blackness" as sign primarily evokes in the public imagination of whites (and all the other groups who learn that one of the quickest ways to demonstrate one's kinship within a white supremacist order is by sharing racist assumptions) hatred and fear. In a white

supremacist context “loving blackness” is rarely a political stance that is reflected in everyday life. When present it is deemed suspect, dangerous, and threatening.

The oppositional black culture that emerged in the context of apartheid and segregation has been one of the few locations that has provided a space for the kind of decolonization that makes loving blackness possible. Racial integration in a social context where white supremacist systems are intact undermines marginal spaces of resistance by promoting the assumption that social equality can be attained without changes in the culture's attitudes about blackness and black people. Black progressives suffered major disillusionment with white progressives when our experiences of working with them revealed that they could want to be with us (even to be our sexual partners) without divesting of white supremacist thinking about blackness. We saw that they were often unable to let go the idea that whites are somehow better, smarter, more likely to be intellectuals, and even that they were kinder than black folks. Decolonized progressive black individuals are daily amazed by the extent to which masses of black people (all of whom would identify themselves as anti-racist) hold to white supremacist ways of thinking, allowing this perspective to determine how they see themselves and other black people. Many black folks see us as “lacking,” as inferior when compared to whites. The paucity of scholarly work looking at the issue of black self-hatred, examining the ways in which the colonization and exploitation of black people is reinforced by internalized racial hatred via white supremacist thinking, is awesome. Few black scholars have explored extensively black obsession with whiteness.

Black theologian James Cone has been one of the few insurgent black intellectuals who has consistently called for critical interrogation of “whiteness” while simultaneously

problematizing constructions of white identity within white supremacist culture. In his early work *A Black Theology of Liberation*, Cone urges folks to understand blackness as an “ontological symbol” that is the quintessential signifier of what oppression means in the United States. Cone calls upon whites, blacks, and all other non-black groups to stand against white supremacy by choosing to value, indeed to love, blackness. Boldly stating his case, Cone suggests:

Most whites, some despite involvements in protests, do believe in “freedom in democracy,” and they fight to make the ideals of the Constitution an empirical reality for all. It seems that they believe that, if we just work hard enough at it, this country can be what it ought to be. But it never dawns on these do-gooders that what is wrong with America is not its failure to make the Constitution a reality for all, but rather its belief that persons can affirm whiteness and humanity at the same time. This country was founded for whites and everything that has happened in it has emerged from the white perspective.... What we need is the destruction of whiteness, which is the source of human misery in the world.

Not surprisingly, many of Cone's readers were disturbed by his evocation of a binary approach. At first glance it can appear to be a mere reversal of white racist paradigms. Blackness in much of his early work is identified with that which is good, righteous, positive and whiteness with all that is bad, negative, sinful.

Cone wanted to critically awaken and educate readers so that they would not only break through denial and acknowledge the evils of white supremacy, the grave injustices of racist domination, but he so moved that they would righ-

teously and militantly engage in anti-racist struggle. Encouraging readers to break with white supremacy as an epistemological standpoint by which they come to know the world, he insisted that "whiteness" as a sign be interrogated. He wanted the public to learn how to distinguish that racism which is about overt prejudice and domination from more subtle forms of white supremacy. In his early work, he frequently chose a rhetoric that would "shock" so as to forcefully impress on the reader's consciousness the seriousness of the issues. Unfortunately, many readers were turned off by his rhetorical stance, his emphasis on binary opposition, and could not hear the wisdom in his call for a critique of whiteness. By focusing on his personal style, many readers willingly allowed themselves to dismiss and/or ignore the extent to which (all polemical rhetoric aside) his discourse on whiteness was a necessary critical intervention, calling for ongoing interrogation of conventional ways of thinking about race or about strategies to eradicate racism.

Cone was suggesting the kind of shift in positionality that has become a crucial and widely accepted tenet of anti-racist struggle advocated in much recent critical work on the subject of race, especially the work that emerges from feminist theory, cultural studies, and postcolonial discourse. Whether they are able to enact it as a lived practice or not, many white folks active in anti-racist struggle today are able to acknowledge that all whites (as well as everyone else within white supremacist culture) have learned to overvalue "whiteness" even as they simultaneously learn to devalue blackness. They understand the need, at least intellectually, to alter their thinking. Central to this process of unlearning white supremacist attitudes and values is the deconstruction of the category "whiteness."

It is much more acceptable nowadays, and even fashionable, to call for an interrogation of the meaning and signif-

cance of "whiteness" in contemporary critical discussions of race. While Cone's analysis was sometimes limited by a discourse that invested in binary oppositions (refusing to cut white folks any slack), the significant critical intervention that he made was the insistence that the logic of white supremacy would be radically undermined if everyone would learn to identify with and love blackness. Cone was not evoking the notion of racial erasure—that is, the sentimental idea (often voiced by religious folks) that racism would cease to exist if everyone would just forget about race and just see each other as human beings who are the same. Instead he insisted that the politics of racial domination have necessarily created a black reality that is distinctly different from that of whites, and from that location has emerged a distinct black culture. His prophetic call was for whites to learn how to identify with that difference—to see it as a basis for solidarity.

This message can be heard in current feminist writing on race. Moving away from the notion that an emphasis on sameness is the key to racial harmony, aware feminist activists have insisted that anti-racist struggle is best advanced by theory that speaks about the importance of acknowledging the 'way positive recognition and acceptance of difference is a necessary starting point as we work to eradicate white supremacy. Critically discussing Richard Rorty's book *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, philosopher Ron Scaap, in his essay "Rorty: Voice and the Politics of Empathy," makes the point that liberals often give lip service to a vision of diversity and plurality while clinging to notions of sameness where we are all one, where (to use Michael Jackson's lyrics) "it doesn't matter if you're black or white." Scaap suggests,

Liberals may pride themselves in their ability to tolerate others but it is only after the other has been redescribed

as oneself that the liberal is able to be "sensitive" to the question of cruelty and humiliation. This act of redemption is still an attempt to appropriate others, only here it is made to sound as if it were a generous act. It is an attempt to make an act of consumption appear to be an act of acknowledgment.

Many unlearning racism workshops focus on helping white individuals to see that they too are wounded by racism and as a consequence have something to gain from participating in anti-racist struggle. While in some ways true, a construction of political solidarity that is rooted in a narrative of shared victimization not only acts to recenter whites, it risks obscuring the particular ways racist domination impacts on the lives of marginalized groups. Implicit in the assumption that even those who are privileged via racist hierarchy suffer is the notion that it is only when those in power get in touch with how they too are victimized will they rebel against structures of domination. The truth is that many folks benefit greatly from dominating others and are not suffering a wound that it is in any way similar to the condition of the exploited and oppressed.

Anti-racist work that tries to get these individuals to see themselves as "victimized" by racism in the hopes that this will act as an intervention is a misguided strategy. And indeed we must be willing to acknowledge that individuals of great privilege who are in no way victimized are capable, via their political choices, of working on behalf of the oppressed. Such solidarity does not need to be rooted in shared experience. It can be based on one's political and ethical understanding of racism and one's rejection of domination. Therefore we can see the necessity for the kind of education for critical consciousness that can enable those with power

and privilege rooted in structures of domination to divest without having to see themselves as victims. Such thinking does not have to negate collective awareness that a culture of domination does seek to fundamentally distort and pervert the psyches of all citizens or that this perversion is wounding.

In his work, Cone acknowledges that racism harms whites yet he emphasizes the need to recognize the difference between the hurt oppressors feel and the pain of the oppressed. He suggests:

The basic error of white comments about their own oppression is the assumption that they *know* the nature of their enslavement. This cannot be so, because if they really knew, they would liberate themselves by joining the revolution of the black community. They would destroy themselves and be born again as beautiful black persons.

Since it is obvious that white folks cannot choose at will to become "black," that utopian longing must be distinguished from a solidarity with blackness that is rooted in actions wherein one ceases to identify with whiteness as symbol of victimization and powerlessness.

Recently, I gave a talk highlighting ways contemporary commodification of black culture by whites in no way challenges white supremacy when it takes the form of making blackness the "spice that can liven up the dull dish that is mainstream white culture." At the end of the talk a white woman who sounded very earnest asked me: "Don't you think we are all raised in a culture that is racist and we are all taught to be racist whether we want to be or not?" Note that she constructs a social framework of sameness, a homogeneity of experience. My response was to say that all white

people (and everyone else in this society) can choose to be actively anti-racist twenty-four hours a day if they so desire and none of us is a passive victim of socialization. Elaborating on this point, I shared how I was weary of the way in which white people want to deflect attention away from their accountability for anti-racist change by making it seem that everyone has been socialized to be racist against their will. My fear is that this often becomes another apology for racism, one which seeks to erase a vision of accountability and responsibility which could truly empower. It was apparent that the white woman who asked the question was dissatisfied with my response. When I suggested that she was less interested in what I had to say and perhaps had her own agenda, she stated that the point she really wanted to make was that "blacks are just as racist as whites—that we are all racists." When I critically interrogated this statement, explaining the difference between prejudicial feelings (which blacks and whites alike harbor towards one another as well as other groups) and institutionalized white supremacist domination, she promptly left.

A vision of cultural homogeneity that seeks to deflect attention away from or even excuse the oppressive, dehumanizing impact of white supremacy on the lives of black people by suggesting black people are racist too indicates that the culture remains ignorant of what racism really is and how it works. It shows that people are in denial. Why is it so difficult for many white folks to understand that racism is oppressive not because white folks have prejudicial feelings about blacks (they could have such feelings and leave us alone) but because it is a system that promotes domination and subjugation? The prejudicial feelings some blacks may express about whites are in no way linked to a system of domination that affords us any power to coercively control

the lives and well-being of white folks. That needs to be understood.

Concurrently, all social manifestations of black separatism are often seen by whites as a sign of anti-white racism, when they usually represent an attempt by black people to construct places of political sanctuary where we can escape, if only for a time, white domination. The ideas of conservative black thinkers who buy into the notion that blacks are racist are often evoked by whites who see them as native informants confirming this as fact. Shelby Steele is a fine example of this tendency. I believe that his essays were the most Xeroxed pieces of writing by white folks in the academy who wanted to share with black colleagues that they have been right all along when they suggested that black folks were racist. Steele suggests that any time black people choose to congregate solely with one another we are either supporting racial separatism because of deeply ingrained feelings of inferiority or a refusal to see racial differences as unimportant (i.e., to accept the notion that we are all the same). Commenting on the issue of self-segregation in *The Content of Our Character*, he declares: "There is a geopolitics involved in this activity, where race is tied to territory in a way that mimics the whites only/colored only designations of the past." At no point in his analysis does Steele suggest that blacks might want to be away from whites to have a space where we will not be the object of racist assaults.

Every aware black person who has been the "only" in an all-white setting knows that in such a position we are often called upon to lend an ear to racist narratives, to laugh at corny race jokes, to undergo various forms of racist harassment. And that self-segregation seems to be particularly intense among those black college students who were often raised in material privilege in predominantly white settings

where they were socialized to believe racism did not exist, that we are all "just human beings," and then suddenly leave home and enter institutions and experience racist attacks. To a great extent they are unprepared to confront and challenge white racism, and often seek the comfort of just being with other blacks.

Steele's refusal to acknowledge this pain—this way that white supremacy manifests itself in daily social interaction—makes it appear that black individuals simply do not like socializing with whites. The reality is that many black people fear they will be hurt if they let down their guard, that they will be the targets of racist assault since most white people have not unlearned racism. In classroom settings, I hear so many narratives of black students who accepted the notion that racism did not exist, who felt there was nothing wrong with being with white friends and sharing similar interests, only to find themselves in circumstances where they had to confront the racism of these people. The last story I heard was from a young black woman talking about always being with white buddies in high school. One day they were all joy-riding in someone's car, and they came across a group of young black males crossing the street. Someone in the car suggests they should "just run those niggers down." She talked about her disbelief that this comment had been made, her hurt. She said nothing but she felt that it was the beginning of an estrangement from white peers that has persisted. Steele's writing assumes that white people who desire to socialize with black people are not actively racist, are coming from a position of goodwill. He does not consider the reality that goodwill can coexist with racist thinking and white supremacist attitudes.

Throughout my tenure as a Yale professor, I was often confronted with white students who would raise the issue of

why it is black students sit together in the cafeteria, usually at one table. They saw this as some expression of racial separatism, exclusion, etc. When I asked them why they never raised the issue of why the majority of tables are white students self-segregating, they invariably said things like, "We sit together with folks with whom we share common interests and concerns." They were rarely at the point where they could interrogate whether or not shared "whiteness" allowed them to bond with one another with ease.

While it has become "cool" for white folks to hang out with black people and express pleasure in black culture, most white people do not feel that this pleasure should be linked to unlearning racism. Indeed there is often the desire to enhance one's status in the context of "whiteness" even as one appropriates black culture. In his essay "A Place Called Home: Identity and the Cultural Politics of Difference," Jonathan Rutherford comments:

Paradoxically, capital has fallen in love with difference: advertising thrives on selling us things that will enhance our uniqueness and individuality. It's no longer about keeping up with the Joneses, it's about being different from them. From World Music to exotic holidays in Third World locations, ethnic tv dinners to Peruvian hats, cultural difference *sells*.

It makes perfect sense that black people and other people of color often self-segregate to protect themselves from this kind of objectifying interaction.

Steele never sees the desire to create a context where one can "love blackness" as a worthy standpoint for bonding, even if such bonding must take the form of self-segregation. Luckily, there are individual non-black people who have di-

vested of their racism in ways that enable them to establish bonds of intimacy based on their ability to love blackness without assuming the role of cultural tourists. We have yet to have a significant body of writing from these individuals that gives expression to how they have shifted attitudes and daily vigilantly resist becoming reinvested in white supremacy. Concurrently, black folks who “love blackness”—that is, who have decolonized our minds and broken with the kind of white supremacist thinking that suggests we are inferior, inadequate, marked by victimization, etc.—often find that we are punished by society for daring to break with the status quo. On our jobs, when we express ourselves from a decolonized standpoint, we risk being seen as unfriendly or dangerous.

Those black folks who are more willing to pretend that “difference” does not exist, even as they self-consciously labor to be as much like their white peers as possible, will receive greater material rewards in white supremacist society. White supremacist logic is thus advanced. Rather than using coercive tactics of domination to colonize, it seduces black folks with the promise of mainstream success if only we are willing to negate the value of blackness. Contrary to James Cone’s hope that whites would divest of racism and be born again in the spirit of empathy and unity with black folks, we are collectively asked to show our solidarity with the white supremacist status quo by overvaluing whiteness, by seeing blackness solely as a marker of powerlessness and victimization. To the degree that black folks embody by our actions and behavior familiar racist stereotypes, we will find greater support and/or affirmation in the culture. A prime example of this is white consumer support of misogynist rap which reproduces the idea that black males are violent beasts and brutes.

In Nella Larsen’s *Passing*, Clare chooses to assume a white identity because she sees blackness only as a sign of victimization and powerlessness. As long as she thinks this, she has a sustained bond with the black bourgeois who often self-segregate even as they maintain contempt for blackness, especially for the black underclass. Clare’s bond with Irene, her black bourgeois friend, is broken when she seeks to define blackness positively. In *Passing* it is this bourgeois class and the world of whiteness Clare’s husband embodies that turn against her when she attempts to reclaim the black identity she has previously denied. When the novel ends we do not know who has murdered her, the black bourgeois friend or the white husband. She represents a “threat” to the conservative hierarchical social order based on race, class, and gender that they both seek to maintain.

Despite civil rights struggle, the 1960s black power movement, and the power of slogans like “black is beautiful,” masses of black people continue to be socialized via mass media and nonprogressive educational systems to internalize white supremacist thoughts and values. Without ongoing resistance struggle and progressive black liberation movements for self-determination, masses of black people (and everyone else) have no alternative worldview that affirms and celebrates blackness. Rituals of affirmation (celebrating black history, holidays, etc.) do not intervene on white supremacist socialization if they exist apart from active anti-racist struggle that seeks to transform society.

Since so many black folks have succumbed to the post-1960s notion that material success is more important than personal integrity, struggles for black self-determination that emphasize decolonization, loving blackness, have had little impact. As long as black folks are taught that the only way we can gain any degree of economic self-sufficiency or be materially privileged

is by first rejecting blackness, our history and culture, then there will always be a crisis in black identity. Internalized racism will continue to erode collective struggle for self-determination. Masses of black children will continue to suffer from low self-esteem. And even though they may be motivated to strive harder to achieve success because they want to overcome feelings of inadequacy and lack, those successes will be undermined by the persistence of low self-esteem.

One of the tragic ironies of contemporary black life is that individuals succeed in acquiring material privilege often by sacrificing their positive connection to black culture and black experience. Paule Marshall's novel *Praisesong for the Widow* is a fictional portrayal of such tragedy. A young black couple, Avey and Jay, start their family life together empowered by their celebration and affirmation of black culture, but this connection is eroded as Jay strives for material success. Along the way, he adopts many mainstream white supremacist ways of thinking about black folks, expressing disdain for the very culture that had been a source of joy and spiritual fulfillment. Widowed, her children grown, Avey begins a process of critical remembering where she interrogates their past, asking herself:

Would it have been possible to have done both? That is, to have wrested, as they had done over all those years, the means needed to rescue them from Halsey Street and to see the children through, while preserving, safeguarding, treasuring those things that had come down to them over the generations, which had defined them in a particular way. The most vivid, the most valuable part of themselves!

To recover herself and reclaim the love of blackness, Avey must be born again. In that state of rebirth and reawak-

ening, she is able to understand what they could have done, what it would have called for: "Awareness. It would have called for an awareness of the worth of what they possessed. Vigilance. The vigilance needed to safeguard it. To hold it like a jewel high out of the envious reach of those who would either destroy it or claim it as their own." To recover herself, Avey has to relearn the past, understand her culture and history, affirm her ancestors, and assume responsibility for helping other black folks to decolonize their minds.

A culture of domination demands of all its citizens self-negation. The more marginalized, the more intense the demand. Since black people, especially the underclass, are bombarded by messages that we have no value, are worthless, it is no wonder that we fall prey to nihilistic despair or forms of addiction that provide momentary escape, illusions of grandeur, and temporary freedom from the pain of facing reality. In his essay "Healing the Heart of Justice," written for a special issue of *Creation Spirituality* highlighting the work of Howard Thurman, Victor Lewis shares his understanding of the profound traumatic impact of internalized oppression and addiction on black life. He concludes:

To value ourselves rightly, infinitely, released from shame and self-rejection, implies knowing that we are claimed by the totality of life. To share in a loving community and vision that magnifies our strength and banishes fear and despair, here, we find the solid ground from which justice can flow like a mighty stream. Here, we find the fire that burns away the confusion that oppression heaped upon us during our childhood weakness. Here, we can see what needs to be done and find the

strength to do it. To value ourselves rightly. To love one another. This is to heal the heart of justice.

We cannot value ourselves rightly without first breaking through the walls of denial which hide the depth of black self-hatred, inner anguish, and unreconciled pain.

Like Paule Marshall's character Avey, once our denial falls away we can work to heal ourselves through awareness. I am always amazed that the journey home to that place of mind and heart, where we recover ourselves in love, is constantly within reach and yet so many black folks never find the path. Mired in negativity and denial we are like sleepwalkers. Yet, if we dare to awaken, the path is before us. In *Hope and History*, Vincent Harding asks readers to consider: "In a society increasingly populated by peoples of color, by those who have known the disdain and domination of the Euro-American world, it would be fascinating to ponder self-love as a religious calling." Collectively, black people and our allies in struggle are empowered when we practice self-love as a revolutionary intervention that undermines practices of domination. Loving blackness as political resistance transforms our ways of looking and being, and thus creates the conditions necessary for us to move against the forces of domination and death and reclaim black life.

BLACK ON BLACK PAIN

CLASS CRUELTY

Class difference is an aspect of black identity that is often overlooked. It is not just white people who refuse to acknowledge different class status among blacks; many of us want to ignore class. A major difference in the agendas set by the movement for civil rights and militant struggles for black power was caused by different class perspectives. Even though the civil rights movement engaged masses of poor and working-class black people, the values shaping this struggle were fundamentally bourgeois. Assimilating the values of white privileged classes was the idea of freedom civil rights struggle supported. Even though the call was for social equality between the races, black leaders were also motivated by a desire to gain access to middle-class incomes and lifestyles. It was this desire for upward class mobility that led black male patriarchy at the forefront of the bus boycott to publicly ignore the courage of lower-class black females who refused to give up their bus seats and to focus on Rosa Parks. This class betrayal is discussed in *Night Vision*, in the chapter "Women and Children in the Armed