

# Hooked on the Art Of Love



**bell hooks**

**And My Calling for Soul-Work**

**Edited by Gary L. Lemons**

*Hooked on the Art of Love acts as a revolutionary model for emancipatory self-expression. Collectively, in the words of bell hooks, the contributors and I labor "to be one with the planet—one healing heart giving and sustaining life. Love is our hope and our salvation." This is the heart of "my calling for "soul-work."*

## Hooked on the Art of Love bell hooks and My Calling for Soul-Work

Edited by Gary L. Lemons

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## **Introduction: bell hooks and “Art on My Mind”**

**Gary L. Lemons**

There are times when I hunger for those days: the days when I thought of art only as the expressive creativity of a soul struggling to self-actualize.

bell hooks, “Introduction: Art Matters,”  
*Art on My Mind: Visual Politics*

Folks want to know how to begin the practice of loving...Awareness is central to the process of life as the practice of freedom. Whenever those of us who are members of exploited and oppressed groups dare to critically interrogate our locations, the identities and allegiances that inform how we live our lives, we begin the process of decolonization.

bell hooks, “Love as the Practice of Freedom,”  
*Outlaw Culture: Resisting Representations*

To love, we have to let fear go and live faith-based lives. Living in faith means that we recognize, as our wise black 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*

### **Calling for *Soul-Work*: Creating a “Beloved Community”**

*Hooked on the Art of Love: bell hooks and My Calling for Soul-Work* personifies the longstanding love for personal, political, pedagogical, and spiritual activism bell hooks envisions. In the closing words of “Loving Justice,” the final chapter of *Salvation: Black People and Love* (2001), she provides the loving groundwork for my idea of “soul-work”—as demonstrated in the activist vision of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.:

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).

In this context, as hooks aligns her inspirited call for social justice to that of Dr. King, I assert that she not only affirms his vision of “a beloved community,” but she also reaffirms my calling for it in *Hooked on the Art of Love*. Thus, her commitment to struggle for social justice—inspired by Dr. King’s missionary journey—epitomizes my calling for diverse forms of activist expression in this book. As I have conceptualized it, imagining a community of individuals soulfully connected, I see them as healers—as way-makers moving “toward the world we must make if we are to be one with the planet—one healing heart giving and sustaining life. They see “[l]ove [as] our



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hope and our salvation.” In one with this holistic vision, my contributors and I aim to fill a planetary canvas full of active intentionality. In my ongoing journey toward reclaiming my freedom as a pro-feminist/womanist black man, bell hooks—as a black feminist cultural critic, pedagogue, *and* artist—led me on an (inner) path to “expressive creativity of a soul struggling to self-actualize” (“Introduction, Art Matters,” *Art on My Mind*, xi). In this soul-searching experience, I began longing for a beloved community. It began in my call out to folk dedicated to labor for the love of soulful, in(Spirit)ed enrichment.

Over the years in reading, writing about, and teaching bell hooks’ writings, I would find the communicative tools to voice my longing. When I began to share my love for art publicly—in and outside my profession as an academic—my “soul-work” in calling out for that community of creative beings would materialize in this book undertaking. hooks’ writings gave breath to my creative calling. In communion with the Spirit of love they embody and enact, I owned my work for the soul—mine and that of others. Beyond my personal artistic evolution as a black man compelled and promoted by hooks’ feminist writings, I would come to know that the life-transforming impact they had on me yet had to be made more broadly impressionable. Toward discovering a strategic artistic location for self-proclamation, as stated above, hooks’ writings provided me with a voice to speak out about the restorative power art can possess when created for soul-healing. Linked to issues of race, gender, class, sexuality, ability, and other life-struggles not identified here, art rooted in love for social justice and human rights possesses to heal.

Soul-healing is the life-sustaining heart of *Hooked on the Art of Love*. As its contributors, we come together to express ourselves across differences of race, ethnicity, gender, class, sexuality, culture, generation, and abilities. Also, whether everyone in this book does or does not identify as a feminist and/or womanist, collectively we validate hooks’ love for social justice in activist resistance to all forms of systemic oppression and domination. We labor together to express our desire to set all people on a path of freedom—love is the art of life. In my mind, this is the essence of soul-work. Thus, this book—

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exhibiting varying forms of self-reflection—weaves together visionary stories of personal survival. We express ourselves in non-fiction, fiction (plays and monologues), poetry, and visual art (including paintings, photography, and drawings). In the art-filled possibilities of these life-changing works, we manifest a Spirit-led bond with bell hooks. In heartfelt communion with her, we sup together in mind, body, and soul. Together we intentionally transgress borders of conventionality. In radical ways we complement each other's insightful standpoints. Wholeheartedly, we illustrate the prophetic resonance of hooks' heartfelt voice for self-transformation. It begins with decolonization. Drawing an integral connection between black identity and creativity, in *Art on My Mind: Visual Politics*, hooks says—

For more black 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 of critical education that would stimulate collective awareness that the creation and public sharing of art is essential to any practice of freedom. (4)

Once again, bell hooks' writings have continued to promote the revolutionary idea of “education for the practice of freedom.” As it relates to “the function of art,” hooks roots her vision of liberation in the notion that “[t]here must be a revolution in the way we see, the way we look”—transgressing borders of difference to imagine a concept of creative *wholeness*—in mind, body, and spirit. From hooks' first book *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (1981), which she began writing at the age of 19, her published writings are deeply embedded in a feminist context. They radically contest traditional discursive genres, academic disciplines, cultural borders (within and outside black communities)—as well as conventional teaching practices. As stated earlier, not only can I personally testify to how profoundly the revolutionary writings of hooks have enabled me *to see* the transformative power of self-reflection, but they have also made it possible for me to view its life-altering effects in the lives of individuals with whom I become “self-actualize[d].” In them I see *and*

feel my self-healing. They are the ones who deeply confirm the life-affirming joy I feel that comes with expressing the need to “[acknowledge] that we [all] have been and are colonized both in our minds and in our imaginations.” hooks declares that in this confession, “we begin to understand the need for promoting and celebrating creative expression” (*Art on My Mind* 4).

### **Loving the Artist in Me: Where it All Began**

Many times when recounting my mother’s stories of gender, race, and class survival—in which my own story about becoming a committed advocate for women’s rights and social justice is intricately interwoven—I am an artist filled with the Spirit of thanksgiving. I am shored up by my mother’s will to live beyond the multiple boundaries she endured growing up as a black female in a working-class (“country”) family in the South. In the strength of her will to survive, in spite of racist, sexist, and classist stereotypes she faced, my mother was—and still is—“an over-comer”. I claim the words of the old black spiritual “how I made it over” as my soulful testament to her loving, life-sacrifice. She enabled me to over-come what my father was not able to give me—a loving vision of liberated manhood. As a black man—continuing to free myself from the shackles of patriarchal masculinist ideology—I remember the struggles my mother faced in subservience to it. Her life (at the age of 84) is a continuous reminder that I am not a helpless male victim in my rejection of patriarchal masculinity absent of love. Speaking about male desire for fatherly love not bound up in phallic power, in *The Will to Change: Men, Masculinity, and Love* (2004)—hooks says,

In our culture we say very little about the longing for father. Rather than bringing us great wisdom about the nature of men and love, reformist feminist focus on male power reinforced the notion that somehow males were powerful and had it all. Feminist writing did not tell us about the deep inner misery of men. It did not tell us the terrible terror that gnaws at the soul when one cannot love. Women who envied men their hardheartedness were not about to tell us the depth of male

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suffering. *And so it has taken more than thirty years for the voices of visionary feminists to be heard telling the world the truth about men and love* (emphasis added). (4)

While my mother never identified as a “feminist” (in truth she doesn’t know this term, nor would ever desire to identify with it), in my life-experience with her—in the face of domestic violence—she taught me to be one. Not because she fought against it, but because growing up my having witnessed her abuse spoke loudly to me about the pain of silence in reaction to it. If loving my mother meant that I would have to become a black male “feminist” advocate for struggle against domestic violence, then fully embracing the title would be my moment of liberation. For me this time of liberatory, male self-hood is a metaphorical articulation of my love for art. In studying bell hooks’ art-*full* writings of her life as a visionary black feminist, cultural critic, *and* teacher, her self-portraits represent art as the root of labor for the soul.

My father loved to draw (though he never shared with me or my brother why he loved to do so). Growing up in a working-class, abusive family home—he left it when he was 13 years old (as I was told, not by him), living a life in the “streets”. He only made it through the 9<sup>th</sup> grade, but entered the Army at age 18. That’s all I know about his background. He met and married my mother two years later; she was 18. Did my father struggle with issues of self-esteem related to growing up in the absence of fatherly love? He never told me. One thing I do know is that his father cheated on his mother. All my father’s sisters and brothers were all dark-skinned, but their “half-brother” was light-skinned. Growing up, not only would I come to know him, I would become close to his light-skinned children, as well. As with many black men and women, historically, the politics of skin-color has always been (and continues to be an issue in many black families. While it was never discussed in my immediate family, the fact that my mother is a “light-skinned” black woman has always made me wonder if my “dark-skinned” father married her because he loved or the *color* of her skin. Whatever the reason, he never exhibited love toward her when I was a child. While issues of love—(and/or its absence), patriarchal power (and its abusive nature), and the pre-

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eminent presence of colorism (enter-related to sexism *and* heterosexuality) in black communities—were never discussed in my home, the silence which masked them left me (as a me as a black male) child feeling loveless. As I write in *Black Male Outsider, a Memoir: Teaching as a Pro-Feminist Man* (2008):

I [have had to] confront my own internalized wounds of male supremacist thinking rooted in [my] personal experience of patriarchal violence. I am a childhood survivor of domestic violence. Owning these words publicly is about openly acknowledging my fear of breaking silence about how deeply wounding the experience of patriarchal can be, not only for women (particularly in a domestic context) who are most often its direct targets but also for children witnessing it. Telling my story of survival marks the end of years of silence and secret shame...Our silence is a most dangerous form of complicity, and serves to protect the abuser. (57-59)

While my father would change his abusive ways—eventually not only joining the black denominational church my mother grew up in, but accepting his call as a minister. Ultimately, he would become the pastor of his own church. Yet, I have never stopped longing for his love absent in my childhood. In 1997, my father died having succumbed to his struggle with lung cancer. As hooks says in *The Will to Change*, “No one hungers for male love more than the little girl or boy who rightfully needs and seeks love from Dad. He may be absent, dead, present in body yet emotionally not there, but the girl or boy hungers to be acknowledged, recognized, respected, cared for” (2). One thing I will always remember about my father is that he was a *giver*. He was always willing to give of his time and energy as a manual-labor for anyone in need. He never looked for any monetary compensation for his service; it was free. I will always value this aspect of my father’s character. It is what I believe my love for creative expression has come to be, as materialized in *Hooked on the Art of Love*.

## **From Then to Now: Charting My Path to Freedom**

From *Black Male Outsider* (2008) to *Caught Up in the Spirit! Teaching for Womanist Liberation* (2017), I have recounted the first time I read bell hooks' book *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (1984). These works represent the evolution of my having chosen to write about the impact of feminism on black men—personally and politically. As self-revealing portraits in critical resistance to heterosexist black manhood and masculinity, they cleared the pathway for the thematic focus of this new book. As I have repeatedly shared with many of its contributors, this project is unlike any of my past “scholarly” endeavors. However, it actually integrates the interpretive foci of *Black Male Outsider* and *Caught Up in the Spirit!* In both of them, I extensively reference the theoretical and critical influence *Feminist Theory* would possess as the driving force not only for my personal journey to self-recovery, it would also act as the metaphorical tool-box from which I constructed ways to teach African American literature and culture. *Feminist Theory* enabled me to begin my own radical process of decolonization from the inside out. In struggle against what hooks identifies (in all her writings) as the system of “imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy,” I boldly “self”-identify as a “black male outsider” in and outside academia. In *Hooked on the Art of Love*, I strategically employ writings by hooks to affirm creative expressivity linked to activism for social justice. As such, this book is my homage to her vision of love as a transformative pathway to freedom for all folk. Rather than a traditional scholarly assessment of hooks' writings—this *art-centered* anthology is dedicated to the revolutionary power of “self-realization” hooks soulfully articulates in *Remembered Rapture: The Writer at Work* (xiv).

Inspired by *Remembered Rapture*, my creative vision for *Hooked on the Art of Love* emerged from a graduate student course I taught several years ago on the writings of bell hooks. I first taught the class in 2015. I called it: “bell hooks and Autocritography.” Over the course of nearly two decades of reading, studying, and teaching hooks' writings, I arrived at a deeper level of critical self-awareness. Teaching the course in 2015, I more fully comprehended the liberating

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implications of hooks as “the writer at work.” Not only had she changed my life over time, in the course, I witnessed the personal, political, and pedagogical transformation of the lives of my students.

Having taught classes on hooks for a decade at The New School in New York City, I never worried about the transgressive standpoint from which hooks critiqued issues of race, gender, class, and sexuality. However, upon ending my time at The New School (a small, “private” university known for its innovative approach to pedagogy) and moving to Florida—where I would begin teaching at a large “public” PWI (predominately white institution)—I experienced feelings of deep trepidation teaching as a “pro-feminist” *black* man. Recalling what I wrote in an essay titled “‘Women’s Studies Is Not My Home?’ When Personal and Political Professions Become Acts of Emancipatory Confession”—

I interpret [bell] hooks’ liberatory image of ‘an alternative black man’ through my own struggle as a professor of feminism. Reflecting upon my own process of self-recovery and healing through black feminist thought, I demonstrate its transformative power as a pedagogical tool in the college classroom. In this space, I continue to work to represent what it means to an alternative black man—a gender traitor—challenging not only patriarchy and white supremacy, but also heterosexism and homophobia. Teaching African American literature from a black feminist standpoint allows my own story of self-recovery and healing to enter the classroom. This creates a space for students to write their own life-narratives into the texts we read during a semester. This strategy challenges students to ‘write from the inside out’ to confront internalized wounds of domination. I have come to think of my work in the classroom as a form of gender healing activism. (176)

Ultimately, in publicly professing my teaching and scholarly connection to the radical ideas of feminism hooks courageously reveals in her unwavering commitment to politics of soulful, inspired liberation—she compelled me “to let fear go and live [a faith-based life].” I would come to realize that “[living a faith-based life meant]

that I had to recognize, as our wise black female ancestors did, that [I possessed] the power to decolonize.”

### **“Brothers of the Soul”**

Ironically, I would be compelled to teach my first graduate course on writings by bell hooks in the English department at the University of South Florida by a white male student named Scott Neumeister. I came to know him as a student previously enrolled in a “Feminist Theory” course I had taught in the department—two years prior. In his prompting me to teach the course on hooks, I first had to release myself from the fear that it would not fulfill the student enrollment number required for the class to be offered. However, it did. Not only had Scott signed up for it, he called out to other graduate students to do so. Not only that, he would be the first graduate student in my teaching career that I would go on to co-author a dialogic essay for publication in *Feminist Solidarity at the Crossroads: Intersectional Women’s Studies for Transracial Alliance* (2012). We titled it—“‘Brothers of the Soul’: Men Learning About and Teaching in the Spirit of Feminist Solidarity.”<sup>1</sup> What I learned from this teacher-student dialogue is that crossing intellectual lines of power and authority in the college classroom is, indeed, liberating for everyone in it—particularly including the “professor”. Opening up about the ways white supremacist and (hetero-)sexist ideologies of manhood and masculinity had bound us to the dictum of patriarchy, we humbled ourselves to the self-liberating possibilities feminism—especially theorized and practiced by black/women of color feminists. For me and Scott, as we continued our work as “brothers of the soul” in the bell hooks class, it would become clear to us that *decolonization* is the pathway to freedom. In *Remembered Rapture*, she deems it as critically necessary for “self-realization” and “[w]riting [as] a way of knowing” (12).

Over time, as I have taught hooks’ writings in both my undergraduate and graduate classes in African American literature—writing in resistance to systemic and institutionalized forms of oppression—is not only socially and politically liberating, it is



personally emancipatory. This is precisely my ultimate aim in professing hooks' writings focused on pedagogical strategies in the college classroom that enable both student *and* teacher to self-actualize. While I did not grow up writing creatively, nor ever took a class in creating writing—I discovered in the writing style hooks propagates a form of self-expression that would give voice to my inner feelings interrelated to my life-experiences as a black male, “special education” student from working-class, religious conservative family in the South. Academic, traditional discourse—while providing “authoritative” credibility to my scholarship—has not totally allowed me to express myself with *attitude*. What I mean in this word-choice is this—through a series of thought-provoking synonyms: “way of behaving” (or “not behaving”), “approach”, “feelings”, “mind-set”, “outlook”, “manner”, “position”, “thoughts”, “viewpoint”, “standpoint”. Together they all signify my struggle to come to voice. Growing up in church, I always used to hear old black folks say, “speak the word” when the preacher was giving *his* sermon. Right, no women were allowed to preach. However, the creative *Word* spoken always drew me into a state of heart-felt, self-reflection.

Contemplating the power of “spoken-word” as a liberatory form of creative expression, in *Hooked on the Art of Love*, I employ it as an insightfully radical, *behavioral approach* to articulate my *mindset* connected to that of bell hooks. First and foremost, through her thoughts about the power of creativity, I not only open this book articulating personal *feelings* and *thoughts* in a *manner* that clearly establishes my *spoken-word* positionality, but I critically weave it through each Part of this text. In doing so, not only do I display my attitudinal *standpoint* toward hooks, I utilize it as a life-connecting, creative thread to promote the collective artistry exhibited by *all* of the book's contributors.

### **I Was the First Black Male...?**

These are the white folks who know intimately by heart the truth that racism is not in their blood, that it is always about consciousness. And where there is consciousness there is

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*choice...Awareness of the ways white supremacist thinking permeates our culture[s] [white, black, as well as other people of color] despite gains in civil rights has helped concerned educators of all races recognize the importance of working to unlearn racism. This is the work that prepares all of us to teach in ways that educate for the practice of freedom (Emphasis added).*

bell hooks, *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope*

I was the first black male (in my Southern, majority white high school?)

Chosen as the school newspaper “Editor”; that white female teacher was no fool.

She knew this here black kid could read *and* write good English words.

I knew I didn’t speak that ebonic-slang lingo that was for them black herds.

I was passin’—from black to white, but my teacher didn’t know it.

She really believed that I possessed some real English word-power that fit.

Yes, power that stood out that made me different from the rest of them folk.

She didn’t see my writin’ as some kind of primary, low-level “black” kiddin’ joke.

I was the first black male (writer from the ‘hood?).

Painting also became my thang at the “integrated” white high school.

Look into that art classroom; mine was the only black body with that paint brush tool.

I forgot I was “black”—‘cause nobody around me was my color there.

Painting still lives was the real life; this and that on the table was the real where.

Where they be? Black subject matter was not the subject of this class.

Man, all I wanted to do was paint my way out of “blackness” to pass.

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I was the first black male (to pass as “white”?).  
By the way, my art teacher was a white woman too.  
It didn’t make it difference to her that I was a different hue.  
She saw my gift in artistic expression that I didn’t want to fully know.  
Behind the paint colors I love, I hid the color black cause I didn’t want it to show.  
Both them white women teachers saw somethin’ creative in me I didn’t see.  
Art? What in the world is that?  
After graduating from that “integrated” (white) high school, I had to put on another hat.

I was the first black “boy” (to go to college?).  
Goin’ to college was not a damn thang my parents knew ‘bout.  
Daddy finished the 9<sup>th</sup> grade and got accepted into the army at 18, without any doubt.  
Momma got only passed 11<sup>th</sup> grade, but later in life got her GED through Divine grace.  
“You want to be an artist? What’s that got to do with gettin’ a job?”  
I want to study art to become a painter. “For real?”  
You the first one in our family thinkin’ ‘bout college as a life-plan.  
“Art will be my focus!”—That I told my parents and I took that stan’.

I was the first black male (who acted like a grown man?).  
Yet again, at an “integrated” white, small college in a Southern state—I was the only black body (male or female) in my art classes for four years.  
One than’ I didn’t do was to feel sorry for myself. I shed no tears.  
In every art class I took—all my professors where white and female.  
I was used to white women teachers tellin’ me my work was good, but I needed it to sale!  
My parents sent me \$20 every week in cash for four years to fund my way through.  
I neva thanked them enough for the sacrifice they made from their point of view.

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I was the first black male (who took for granted his parents' monetary sacrifice?)

To justify my art decision, I took up English lit. education as another money-making path.

Ain't they what black educated folks always became as teachers to hold down their wrath.

Don't paint, don't write—teach English to make you sound smart—right?

Guess what, what? A white woman, stylish professor at that Southern college promoted my English track.

In all the English classes I took that she taught, she made me feel like she had my back.

I didn't make no "A's" in her classes though, but she neva told me to get outside that do'.

Once again, a white woman teacher taught me I could sit with smart white students in a row.

I was the first black male (English major at a majority white college?)

Thinkin' that I could write and read proper white folks' books in English, I gained some insight.

This shouldn't cause anybody to want to start a race-war fight.

Maybe I could even apply to become the "Editor" of the Southern college yearbook.

Man, that's crazy! What made you think that white male journalism professor would give you a look?

Well he did for whatever reason. I got the position with a white female student from the Midwest.

Together we knew we could pass the high-standard editorial test.

Together as "Co-editors"—we developed a racial-integration plan for the book to feature racial inclusion.

Before we submitted the yearbook for publication, the white male professor looked at the pictures of diversity in the book and concluded we were tryin' to cause confusion.

He told us, we had too many pictures of black folks in the book out of their real proportion percent.

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If effect, he said that me and this white girl had raised the “minority” status of blacks, hittin’ white supremacist power with a hard dent. We told him that that didn’t make no sense; we were tryin’ to take white people’s power down.

If anything we were tryin’ to make white people look good with color folk all aroun’.

I was the first black male (at that college to inspire some cross-racial interaction?)

Then that white man told us we were fired; all the work me and that white girl had done was placed in the trash.

All that we had accomplished to create the book had taken a nose-dive crash.

That day we boldly walked out of his office with tears of pain rooted in joy. We began a campus-wide protest.

We determined not to let one white man take away what we had done as our best.

She and I decided to make a case for justice work; we went to the office of the college’s Vice-President.

When wanted him to get a clear sense that commitment to diversity was not just a momentary hint.

We told this white man in charge of student success that what we had tried to show in the book was ‘bout promoting racial integration as an idea of ALL “inclusion”.

It wasn’t about tryin’ to build up some kind of anti-white collusion.

I was the first black male (to cause trouble on a majority white college campus?)

Me and that white girl did cause some needed race consciousness trouble.

We organized a student protest and had a meetin’ where the VP came for double.

Yes, he joined us in the struggle for color rights.

That white man VP stood with us in the student union that night with bright lights.

He said it wasn’t ‘bout number but how we showed campus unity.

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We won—the victory for diversity was a battle that reinforced the import of community.

Next thing we knew that next year our white male journalism was gone.

We had nothin' to do with that. All we know is that the Yearbook was the back-bone!

I was the first black male (to receive a BA in Art *and* English Education?)

What difference did it make? My design on the cover of that yearbook remained.

Showin' folk of all differences holding hands walking togetha' was what I gained.

Lookin' back at that time in my life, I knew I had received my callin'. Teachin' art through paintin', drawin', and literature would keep me from fallin'—

Even if I had to cause some trouble as a black “boy”,

I would come to know that teachin' creative expression would bring somebody some joy!

I was the first black male (He chose to be...?)

Who the “He” I'm talkin' 'bout that saved the black “boy” in me to become a man?

He—the ONE who created me—the CREATOR of all things who can. What I mean by “who can” is that He do stuff we will neva understand.

Like takin' a po' lil black “boy” and turnin' him into a black man willin' to stand.

Teachin' for folks of all colors to love each other ain't 'bout me; It's 'bout the gift of life givin' me to be me so I CAN be free!

In 2016 at USF, a white male student said I should teach a “graduate” course on bell hooks.

At a majority white university in the South, I thought he had to know I would get some looks.

I taught the course; he took it; we got the proof in the course that it was to be.

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Honestly, I neva thought this could/would happen at this school, see. In truth, that course on hooks laid the foundation for my new book. In reality, that white male student had grabbed onto my life-saving hook.

I was the first black male (to believe?)

—That a white woman, high school teacher could name a black male as editor of a newspaper (at a majority white high school)?

—That a white woman, high school art teacher thought a black male could be a painter?

—That a white woman, English professor thought that a black male could teach English?

—That a white man (VP of Student Affairs at a Southern state college) could defend racial diversity on a majority white campus?

—That a white male student of mine would make me think a black male college, pro-feminist/womanist professor could make a difference in the lives of white folks?

I was the first black male (to imagine the *possibility of white folks as black allies for black folks?*

IMAGINE the *possibility* of that!)

### **“I Once was Blind, But Now I See [Me]”**

Like hooks, I am always aware of the visionary power of spirituality. Having recovered it as an enlivening site for grounding my creative abilities, I convey its transformative agency in my pro-feminist/womanist approach to teaching African American literature. hooks underscore the strategic connection she makes between “the spiritual and the political” in her writings. In *Remembered Rapture*, she says that—

Using this vision of self-recovery to think about the struggles of colonized people to make themselves subject, [she] began to see points of convergence between the effort to live in the spirit and the effort of oppressed people to renew their spirits, to find

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themselves again in resistance. In [her] political writing, [she] began to draw together the spiritual and the political. (116)

Now having read, studied, and taught bell hooks' writings over two decades, I fully comprehend the relationship she has reinforced between the spiritual and the political. Her correlation of them not only provided me with the healing tools of love for myself recovery, they afforded me "the power to decolonize [the minds of my students, enabling them to re-invent themselves, and to dwell] in the spirit of love that is *our* true destiny" (Emphasis added). As human beings struggling to survive the trauma of systemic and institutionalized oppression, to live we must free ourselves from the traumatizing pain of colonization. As teacher and mentor for my own process of decolonization, I have learned from hooks that "[a]wareness is central to the process of life as the practice of freedom [especially for] those of us who are members of exploited and oppressed groups [daring] to critically interrogate our locations, the identities and allegiances that inform how we live our lives." I would come to know this as the *soul-work* of my scholarly, pedagogical, and artistic *calling* through the work(s) of bell hooks. Having for years denied the power of my artistry as a painter, like hooks, I remember "times when I hunger[ed] for those days: the days when I thought of art as [my] expressive creativity [as] a soul struggling to self-actualize." Yet once again, as I stated earlier, *Hooked on the Art of Love* is about my personal journey to self-actualization. However, in a much larger context, it is about building a "beloved community" with other artists—joining them in the creative labor I call "soul-work."

### **Note**

<sup>1</sup>The full dialogue would be published in *Women's Studies*, July 2013, Vol. 43 Issue 5, pp. 509-533.



**Part I**  
**In Soul-Rhythm with bell hooks:**  
**Writers at Work**

In response to what I took to be the spiritual hunger of my students and my own longings, I worked to create a critical pedagogy that would enable students to use the knowledge and information gained in the university to live more fully in the world, one that would speak to heart, soul, mind body, and spirit... Giving a lay sermon at a Yale (University) black church service during International Women's month, I found myself struggling to articulate my sense of spirituality, its meaning in my life. My talk was titled 'Called to Love'... Letting my political and intellectual work be guided by an ethics of Love, I began to feel a harmony where there had been a conflict. My quest was to express divine Love to the fullest in all my work.

bell hooks, *Remembered Rapture: The Writer at Work*

**1**  
**The Art of Teaching Love:  
“bell hooks and Autocritography”**

**Gary L. Lemons**

Anyone who teaches courses on black women’s fiction [and/or nonfiction] knows how difficult it is to find the works of black women (they go out of print rapidly, do not get reprinted, or if reprinted come out in editions that are so expensive that students can rarely afford to buy them for their personal libraries and certainly cannot teach them in classes where many books must be purchased)...It is my hope that the current interest in works of a few black women writers will lead to the recognition of the need to encourage and promote such writing—not just the work of famous black women but the work of unknown, struggling, aspiring writers who need to know that their creative work is important, that it deserves their concentrated attention, and that it need not be abandoned.

bell hooks, *Remembered Rapture: The Writer a Work* [Autocritography] is a self-reflexive, self-consciously academic act that foregrounds aspects of the genre typically dissolved

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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 in *Scenes of Instruction: A Memoir*

I position the epigraphs above together for two strategic reasons. First, I emphasize the critical importance of sustaining the presence and availability of writings (whether fiction or nonfiction) by of black women *and* women of color authors. As hooks states, their writings “go out of print rapidly, do not get reprinted, or if reprinted come out in editions that are so expensive that students can rarely afford to buy them.” I whole-heartedly promote her “hope...[related] to the need to encourage and promote [their] writing—not just the work of famous black women but the work of unknown, struggling, aspiring writers [of all colors] who need to know that their creative work is important”—especially when it promotes struggles for social justice. In teaching literature by black/feminists of color (across differences of gender and sexualities), I aim to advance hooks' idea “that it deserves their concentrated attention, and that it need not be abandoned.” Secondly, I feature Michael Awkward's definition of the term “autocritography” to give name to my interpretive understanding for how bell hooks intentionally interweaves autobiography with social and cultural criticism. However, in his book *Scenes of Instruction, a Memoir*, before Awkward interprets his comprehension of it—he contextualizes its use as employed by Henry Louis Gates Jr. “in a promotional blurb for a book of critical essays by Houston A. Baker Jr. to signify ‘an autobiography of a critical concept’ (7).

In my sense of the terminology Gates makes use of in his “promotional blurb”—as Awkward concisely *re*-formulates it to identify his mergence of personal narrative with “critical concept[ion]”—I believe autocritography well describes the creative stylistics of hooks. Over time, having taught her writings and written

extensively about them, I would come to represent her writing style in the college classroom as creative nonfiction—advocating social activism. Most importantly, I employ hooksean autocritography as a radical rhetorical strategy for my students to utilize it as a transformative pathway for self-actualization. Pedagogically, it also allows me to integrate it into the “professional concerns” of my students. Specifically, in this way, the objectives (as correlated the required readings)<sup>1</sup> for my graduate class—“bell hooks and Autocritography”—take into “account [the] individual, social, and institutional conditions that help to produce [scholarship of students enrolled in it].” I offer below an excerpt from my course rationale (as quoted from the syllabus):

Centered on the writings of radical, black feminist author bell hooks—beginning with her first book *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (1981)—this course will map her trajectory as one of today's most contributory voices in the cultural, theoretical, and political representations of the African American discursive tradition. As the course will illustrate, hooks—positioning the critical import of memoir in her writings—strategically merges autobiography with social critique—known as “autocritography”...In sum—as a black feminist, theory-rich course grounded in the emancipatory literary, cultural, critical, and scholarly production of bell hooks—it will forge its own path toward a committed investment in the preeminent legacy of her own *herstory*.

In 2018, I would teach the course again with 12 graduate students (8 white females, 2 white males; 2 blacks: one female, the other male). In what follows in Part I, “In Soul-Rhythm with hooks: Writers at Work” I bring together writings composed by individuals who studied with me in the 2015 and 2018 offerings of the course. These writers demonstrate the self-actualizing agency of autocritography—as inspired by the rhythmic soulful writings of hooks.

In both courses, *Remembered Rapture: The Writer at Work* opened students' awareness of the creative landscape upon which bell hooks would build the artistic foundation for her “calling” as a black woman writer. Not only writers from the course represented in Part I

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reference this book, I repeatedly do so throughout the other Parts of *Hooked on the Art of Love*. As a guiding light in hooks' struggle to own her gift of writing, *Remembered Rapture* provides a clear sense of the revelatory agency her creative soul-work embodies. It also shares her appreciation for those women writers (across race) "whose work and literary presence influences [her], shaping the contours of [her] imagination, expanding the scope of [her] vision" (xii). "The writer[s] at work" in her creative life include Emily Dickinson, Toni Cade Bambara, Ann Petry, Zora Neale Hurston, Lorraine Hansberry, and Toni Morrison. In the opening pages of the book's "preface: rapture from the deep," hooks reveals—

As a writer I come back to the same place again and again, hoping to make a new discovery or to see an old idea in a fresher light. When I am writing, when I am reading, I reflect on the process of writing itself...I look at the link between my writing and spiritual belief and practice...Again and again I return to the issue of voice—to break silence, to talk about the reality that black women's literary voices are here to stay even as we still confront a culture that is not yet fully ready to register and recognize the diversity and range of our vision....  
(xi-xii)

Further addressing the transnational struggle of "black women's literary voices" to be heard—in resistance the imposed oppression of silence—she boldly remembers the ancestral battle black women writers fought to hold onto their "natural impulse to create" from within themselves:

No! Black women in the diaspora do not come to writing naturally, for there is always someone standing ready to silence the natural impulse to create as it arises in us, and so to write we must ever resist. We must ever remember that our ancestors sacrificed that we might possess the skill to read—to write. No! Black women have not come to writing naturally for we have 'come over a way that with tears has been watered, treading our feet through the blood of the slaughtered.' We have come to writing through the suffering of our ancestors here on these shores. While this suffering does not sanctify us it does remind

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us that ours is a literary history where even the treat of death could not silence our passion for written words—our longing to read, to write, to know. (xiii—xiv)

In the essays that comprise *Remembered Rapture*, bell hooks creates the rhythmic tones, shades, and colors that resonate so artfully in tune with the personally expressive writings in each Part of *Hooked on the Art of Love*. They especially prepare the reader to see the exhibition of visual creativity represented in Part III—“Soulful Shades of Visuality in Black, White, and Gray.”

### **Note**

<sup>1</sup>Through hooks’ autocritographical writings, we will comprehend her struggle in support of the eradication of historical and prevailing myths, stereotypes, distortions, and misinformation specifically related to black female identity in a culture of white supremacy, patriarchy, (hetero)sexism, homophobia, and classism. Through the texts we read by hooks, we will come to understand more fully the discursive strategy she employs as she grounds it in her life stories as a black feminist writer, professor and activist. Through her writings, we will critically question our personal attitudes and beliefs about gender, race, class, and sexual difference. Required course texts include—*Ain’t I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism*; *Remembered Rapture: The Writer at Work*; *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*; *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black*; *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*; *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope*; *Teaching Critical Thinking: Practical Wisdom*; *Salvation: Black People and Love*; *Feminism is for Everybody: Passionate Politics*. Recommended readings by bell hooks include—*Reel to Reel: Race, Sex, and Class at the Movies*; *Outlaw Culture: Resisting Representations*; *Sisters of the Yam: Black Women and Self-Recovery*; *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics*; *Breaking Bread: Insurgent Black Intellectual Life*; *Black Looks: Race and Representation*; *The Will to Change: Men, Masculinity, and Love*; *Killing Rage: Ending Racism*; *All about Love: New Visions*; *We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity*; *Rock My Soul: Black People and*

*Hooked on the Art of Love*

*Self-Esteem; Communion: The Female Search for Love; and Wounds of Passion: A Writing Life.*

# Hooked on the Art Of Love



**bell hooks**

**And My Calling for Soul-Work**

**Edited by Gary L. Lemons**

*Hooked on the Art of Love acts as a revolutionary model for emancipatory self-expression. Collectively, in the words of bell hooks, the contributors and I labor "to be one with the planet—one healing heart giving and sustaining life. Love is our hope and our salvation." This is the heart of "my calling for "soul-work."*

## Hooked on the Art of Love bell hooks and My Calling for Soul-Work

Edited by Gary L. Lemons

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