

*Liberation for the Oppressed: Community Healing through Activist Transformation, A Call to "CHAT" unites individuals across differences of race, gender, class, sexuality, and ability in communal alliance for the love of social justice.*

**Liberation for the Oppressed:**  
**Community Healing through Activist Transformation, A Call to "CHAT"**  
By Gary L. Lemons

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# LIBERATION FOR THE OPPRESSED

COMMUNITY HEALING  
THROUGH ACTIVIST TRANSFORMATION,  
A CALL TO "CHAT"

EDITED BY

GARY L. LEMONS

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## Preface

### **Soul Work: My Calling for Community Healing through Activist Transformation**

**Gary L. Lemons**

Hear my soul from the inside out  
I have become a *Black* man with revolutionary thoughts for self-liberation it's true  
How you see me on the outside shouldn't rely on a Eurocentric  
racialized "other" view  
My African ancestors were not born in just one color or hue  
Their tribal interactions are yet another linguistic vocal counter-clue  
Hear my soul from the inside out  
When I look at myself  
I see many creative Africentric images of liberation in my ONE whole-self  
My Mind Body and Soul are composed of differences in what you may not see  
But don't close your eyes—see all the Blackness in me that will always be  
Hear soul from the inside out  
Being Black for 500 years on this constitutionalized enslavement ground  
has stood the test of time  
Is white supremacy still an issue in this day and is it a crime?  
What do you think? Through spoken words I play on my life-calling to give  
The more I express myself the longer I live  
Hear my soul from the inside out  
For me spoken-word for freedom is a life-saving power  
I have discovered it as my creative source for self-recovery hour after hour  
Will I stop speaking out for liberation of the oppressed? My  
answer will always be "No!"  
Activism against racism performs as *soul work*, a live-stream  
Black freedom talk show  
Here my soul from the inside out  
Let's begin to "chat" for Community Healing through Activist Transformation

In the *Oxford Languages Dictionary*, the word “chat” is defined in two grammatical forms through cyber-technology. As a verb it represents an “exchange [of] messages online in real time with one or more simultaneous users of a computer network,” as in “I keep getting messages popping up on my screen from people wanting to chat.” As a noun “chat” signifies “the online exchange of messages in real time with one or more simultaneous users of a computer network,” as in “join Me for a live online chat Wednesday ...” According to Merriam-webster.com, two definitions of “chat” are (a.) “to talk in an informal or familiar manner” and (b.) “to take part in an online discussion in a chat room.” Long before “chat” became an integral, common word-choice/tech-tool for naming computerized everyday communication among folk, I thought of it as a strategic means to build community dialogue for activist engagement in support service for anyone in need of healing—in mind, body, and soul. For me, “chat” would become my *soul work* for enacting “community healing through activist transformation”—in and beyond academia.

### **“Hear My Soul from the Inside Out”**

I open this “Preface” with my spoken-word poem “Here My Soul from the Inside Out.” I not only employ it to introduce myself, but also to foreground my concept of *soul work* in struggle against anti-Black racism. Moreover, as a Black man contemplating his life-calling in “higher” education to liberate the oppressed, I call the writers in *Liberation for the Oppressed* to respond to it. I must admit that embracing my cultural identification with Blackness in an Africentric context has been a life-long personal struggle. Facing anti-Black racism in the U.S. from childhood to adulthood, I spent most of my life denying being Black—internalizing “whiteness” as the ideological foundation of the “American Dream”. My dreaming to realize it meant that I had to be willing to erase my Blackness—to become invisible, ideologically assimilating into the benefits of being white.

Fully embracing my Blackness has been a long time coming. The price I paid for assimilating into whiteness left me emotionally broke from the inside out. However, I have come to a revolutionary homeplace of inner sanctity for Black love. This sacred residence for activist solidarity and alliance against anti-Black racism allows me openly and lovingly to embrace myself through the creative power of spoken-word. Through it, I possess an artistic tool for maintaining my soulful expression as a Black man of African descent in the U.S. Truthfully, as a symbolic and realized acronym,

“CHAT” represents my transgressive word-play demonstrating the critical need for activist dialogue in resistance to anti-Black racism.

In *Liberation for the Oppressed*, “CHAT” acts to break new ground for planting the seed of liberating hope—personified in the vision of a “beloved community,” as imagined by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. In this deeply insightful context—considering the violent, deadly, and traumatizing effects of racism experienced by Black Indigenous People of Color (BIPOC) historically and in this contemporary moment in the U.S.—there remains a critical need for demonstrative, dialogical engagements that boldly promote the practice of anti-racism. In her “Prologue” to *Post-Traumatic Slave Syndrome: America’s Legacy of Enduring Injury and Healing* (2005, 2017), Dr. Joy DeGruy speaks about the global history of the traumatizing effects of systemic oppression, specifically revealed in institutionalized human enslavement. She states:

Throughout recorded history people have subjugated, enslaved, and at times even exterminated one another.... Furthermore, these crimes are perpetuated in a seemingly never-ending cycle.... Breaking this cycle and claiming our humanity will require much work from all of us. Those who have been the victims of years, decades, and centuries of oppression first must heal from injuries received first-hand, as well as those passed down through the ages. (iv)

In solidarity for social justice, people openly committed to calling out and acting in unity to end systemic and institutionalized racism perform the essential labor of love to realize freedom for the oppressed. First and foremost, as Dr. DeGruy professes throughout her book and commitment to anti-oppressive activism, anti-racist allies must expose the emotional effects of “Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome” (PTSS). Throughout my writings in *Liberation for the Oppressed*, addressing the emotional dehumanization of anti-Black racism, I employ the term “trauma” as a key signifier of its inner *and* outer life-threatening effects.

Not only are my spoken-words in “Here My Soul from the Inside Out” personal and political, they also embody my inspired love for anti-racist dialogical activism. Moreover, I seek to link its conception integrally to the writers’ works in *Liberation for the Oppressed* as well as my pedagogical practice of and for *soul work*. In the evolution of my scholarship devoted to teaching Black feminist-womanist theory and criticism—at the intersection of race, gender, class, sexuality, culture, and ability—I have continually contemplated and written about the self-liberating power students’



voices can embody when unified in the ongoing struggle against the perpetuation of racism. I teach critical consciousness for ways to heal from PTSS. In my courses, I act to utilize “chat” as a crucial template for community building for well-being and self-recovery.

In 2020, the USF Research Task Force Grant “Understanding and Addressing Blackness and Anti-Black Racism in our Local, National, and International Communities” I received infused the realization of my vision for “CHAT”. Promoting the practice anti-racist alliance-building in partnership with Black Clinical Therapist Risasi Milima (as my Co-Investigator), he and I created a research project we called “Black Men for CHAT and the Emotional Freedom Train(ing): Get on Board!” We conceptualized it as a 12-track online program for Black male well-being and self-recovery. Together, we conducted the program from October 2020-March 2021. However, at the time of its conception, I had no idea that Emotional Freedom Train(ing)—grounded in the seven principles of Kwanzaa (as conceived in the language of Swahili by Maulana Karenga, professor of African American studies in 1966<sup>1</sup>)—would have such a profound impact on my vision of teaching in resistance to the trauma of anti-Black racism. As Karenga taught, the seven principles of Kwanzaa include: 1. Umoja (Unity), 2. Kujichagulia (Self-Determination), 3. Ujima (Collective Work and Responsibility), 4. Ujamaa (Cooperative economics), 5. Nia (Purpose), 6. Kuumba (Creativity), 7. Imani (Faith).

Strategically connecting these principles with my pedagogical approach to African American literature, I contemplated their inspirational agency through the lens of Black feminist-womanist thought. In each of the courses I taught during spring semester 2021 (one for undergrads, the other for graduate students), the Kwanzaa principles sustained and reinforced my dedication to teaching for Black liberation. Because of the COVID-19 pandemic USF mandated that all course be taught online. In line with it, the Emotional Freedom Train(ing)-CHAT project was also conducted in a virtual context.

Yet in this cyber-format, “chat” functioned as a critical source of inspiration in the USF grant project and my courses as well. The activist-centered dialogues I experienced with Milima and the Black male participants during the 12-track EFT program would act as a catalyst for me to compel my students to engage in online soulful “chat(s)” in resistance to anti-Black racism. During that spring 2021 literally life-challenging semester, in both my African American literature courses, students

and I confronted the life-threatening pandemic of racism. Together my students and I crossed the social programmatical “tracks” of race, gender, class, sexuality, and ability to confront the ill-induced trauma of systemic and institutionalized anti-Black racism. Once again, according to Dr. DeGruy:

Since the time the first enslaved Africans arrived in the Americas, in the early 1500s, to the present day, Europeans and their descendants have gone to great lengths to justify the 500 hundred years of trauma and dehumanization they and their institutions produced. The effects of this trauma and dehumanization are observable today, and can be explained by the theory of Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome. (52)

In line with the theory of Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome and its dehumanizing implications over the course of 500 years, in *The Mark of Slavery: Disability, Race, and Gender in Antebellum America* (2021), Jennifer L. Barclay researches the history of anti-Black racism and its connection to disability. Considering this, Barclay pointedly notes that until this contemporary moment scholarship focused on the subject of slavery rarely engaged its intersectional relation to the physical and emotional trauma of the history of enslaved Africans in the U.S.—

Parallel to the relative lack of attention that historians of slavery paid to disability until recently, few disability historians explicitly address slavery and the relationship between racism and ableism that was so integral to the institution’s material and ideological underpinnings.... This binary approach ignores the deep imprint of chattel slavery on the long sweep of American history.... A disability history of slavery lays a necessary foundation for more thorough, critical examination of how race and disability shaped [B]lack life in the post-emancipation decades. At the same time, it lends a new angle on the intellectual history of race. (4-5)

Very clear in the trailblazing scholarship of DeGruy and Barclay is the fact that anti-Black racism, contextualized in the history of slavery in the U.S., continues to be physically, emotionally, and psychologically dehumanizing. Therefore, its traumatizing effects in the lives of African Americans must be viewed from an intersectional standpoint not only connected to gender, class, and sexuality, but also critically addressed in studies of Black experience(s) of disability. Barclay asserts: “Given the tremendous, far-reaching significance of slavery in the nation’s history, it is essential to reckon with how disability—as lived human experience and social and

cultural metaphor—intersected with the [U.S. foundational ‘Constitution’ of the chattel enslavement of Africans]” (4).

### **A Calling in the Spirit of Love: Confessing the When, Where, and How My Soul Work Began**

In the production of my scholarship over the course of time, as a Black male professor supporting Black feminist-womanist theory and criticism, I would comprehend the complexity of African American identity through the lens of “intersectionality” as Kimberlé Crenshaw termed it in *Critical Race Theory: The Key Writings that Formed the Movement* (1995). Thus, being critically conscious of the complexity of systemic and institutionalized oppression, I must continually link my critique of anti-Black racism with its interconnection to issues of patriarchy, sexism, classism, homophobia, and ableism.

While I have not formally studied or researched the subject of disability related to the effects of Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome (PTSS), I can attest to the experience of disability imposed upon me as a disheartening form of ableism. Early on in childhood, I faced certain academic challenges related to my intellectual ability. It began when I was

... a six-year-old child entering first grade at the all [B]lack student Catholic school (in my hometown of Hot Springs, Arkansas) run by a white diocese ... I was cast as outside the norm by the white nun who taught my class. I was left-handed. As such, clearly in front of my classmates, I was continually tapped on that hand with a wooden ruler the teacher held to prompt me to write with my right hand. While she persisted in this strategy, it never worked. Eventually, she reported my ‘disability’ to the head-sister (who was also white) in charge of the school. At the end of the school year, she called my parents to meet with her. Present at the meeting with them, I (as well as they) had no idea what I had done to be the subject of this meeting. I (and they) listened carefully as the sister told them that the school did not have the resources to work with me due to what she characterized as my severe learning deficiency.

In fact, the head-sister told my parents that given the situation, I could no longer attend the school. She recommended that I be placed in a school that offered ‘special education.’ My parents ... listened quietly without contesting what they heard and were told to do. The head-sister’s declaration that day marked

the beginning of my identification as a special education student. Both having grown up in Arkansas, nationally known for its segregated schooling through the late 1950s, my parents the next year enrolled me in the all [B]lack elementary school near our home. While I had no idea that I was a slow learner, the [B]lack female teachers I had from second to sixth grade made me feel like I fit in with the regular kids at the school. They did not make special education a designation of marginalization and abnormality. (*Caught Up in the Spirit! Teaching for Womanist Liberation* xv-xvi)

In the process of releasing the internalization of ableism in my educational development, I also remember growing up in a Black church setting that also compelled me to contemplate inner-healing as a ministerial calling for *soul work*.<sup>2</sup> I grew up listening to “grown” Black church folk telling their inspirational stories of survival, especially recounting their struggles against racism. They called them “testimonies.” All of them had gripping stories to tell. Sharing them was an integral part of every church service.

However, experiencing racially integrated education in high school, I would unknowingly assimilate into the idealization of “whiteness” as the path to professional success, equated with the aim of desegregated schooling. In deed and action, I had internalized the notion that *higher* education in a PWI truly represented my way up the “ivory” tower to success. Moreover, I was the only Black student in *all* my English courses, as an undergraduate through my graduate school training. Also, in this context, the courses (focused exclusively on white “British and American” literature, written mainly by white male authors) were taught by white professors—most of whom were women.

As I have written in *Black Male Outsider, a Memoir: Teaching as a Pro-Feminist Man* (2008), only in one literature course I took during my graduate studies at New York University as a doctoral student did the white woman professor require students to read a text by Black author. That author was bell hooks: her book *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (1984). Before the end of the semester, the professor (who had been a graduate student of hooks when she was a professor at Yale University) invited hooks to give a talk on campus. I attended the talk. At the end of it, I approached hooks and asked her to sign my copy of her book. She did. In retrospect, as I have written, reading *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* changed my life. In the book’s closing chapter, “Feminist Revolution: Development Through

Struggle,” she says, “Our emphasis must be on cultural transformation: destroying dualism, eradicating systems of domination. Our struggle will be gradual and protracted. Any effort to make feminist revolution here can be aided by the example of liberation struggles led by oppressed peoples globally who resist formidable powers” (163).

In hindsight, in that course on “Contemporary Feminist Literature,” I learned exactly what hooks promotes in this passage not only for “feminist revolution,” but for how it “can be aided by the example of liberation struggles led by oppressed peoples globally who resist formidable powers.” For those of us committed to activist resistance against the perpetuation of racism, we have documented proof—from the Civil Rights movement in the 1950s through the Black Power movement in the 1960s to the Black Lives Matter movement in this day and time—that the struggle must continue. For the *liberation for the oppressed*, we must join together in action to end systemic and institutionalized oppression all over the world.

Through her vision of Black feminist liberation, bell hooks compelled me to move “from the margin to the center” as a Black man who would eventually accept his calling to practice a revolutionary vision of *higher* education. Two years after I received my doctorate in English at New York University in 1992 (while residing in South Orange, New Jersey), I would travel to Hot Springs, Arkansas to be officially ordained as a minister on December 5, 1994.<sup>3</sup> When I began as professor teaching at Eugene Lang College (the undergraduate division of the New School University) in 1994, I also served as a clergy member of a Black church in Newark, New Jersey. During my time there, I collaborated with JoAnn Oliver, a “sista” in the church who had founded a ministry aimed to help anyone in need of self-recovery (whether related to drug addiction, sexual and/or domestic abuse, low self-esteem, ableism, poverty, among other forms of self-deprecation). To complement this community-based project, I planned to establish a “Center for Healing And Transformation.” Yet, for many complicated reasons, this “CHAT” never materialized. However, in 2007 having accepted a professorship in the English department at the University of South Florida, I remained focused on teaching African American literature at the intersection of Black feminist and womanist studies.

## **Reclaiming the Power of Revolutionary Black Theology**

In reality, I put my commitment to Black theological activism on hold. It would not be until 2014, when the Chair of the English Department asked me to teach a literary studies course titled "The Bible as Literature." Teaching it prompted me to reconnect my ministerial activism to Black liberation struggles—not only confronting issues of racism, but also those interrelated to sexism, classism, homophobia, and ableism. Having come to critical consciousness about the intersectional relationship between racist injustice and other forms of systemic oppression, at the same time, I would also comprehend the complexity of biblical literary studies through Black liberation theology. The activist-oriented writings of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and the radical works of James H. Cone would significantly impact my pedagogical practice.<sup>4</sup> In particular, as a revolutionary professor of liberatory theology, Cone taught and wrote about having to "reconcile" King's non-violent approach to racism with Malcolm X's "by any means necessary" standpoint. He addresses this conflict in the 1989 "Preface" of the reissued edition of *Black Theology and Black Power* stating:

Since I was, like many African-American ministers, a devout follower of Martin King, I tried initially to ignore Malcolm's cogent *cultural* critique of the Christianity as it was taught and practice in black and white churches. I did not want him to disturb the theological certainties that I had learned in graduate school. But with the urban unrest in the cities and the rise of Black Power during the James Meredith March in Mississippi (June 1966), I could no longer ignore Malcolm's devastating criticisms of Christianity, particularly as they were being expressed in the articulate and passionate voices of Stokely Carmichael, Ron Karenga, the Black Panthers, and other young African-American activists. For me, the burning theological question was, how can I reconcile Christianity and Black Power, Martin Luther King Jr.'s idea of nonviolence and Malcolm X's 'by any means necessary' philosophy? The writing of *Black Theology and Black Power* was the beginning of my search for a resolution of that dilemma. (xxvi)

Even more compelling for me—beyond reconciling political, ideological differences between King and Malcolm X—is Cone's self-reflective journey is his unabashed willingness to call out sexism in the Black Power Movement, as well as in his own thinking. Reflecting about his use of sexist language in the revised published version of *Black Theology and Black Power* in 1989, Cone remarks:

The publication of the twentieth-anniversary edition tempted me to rid *Black Theology and Black Power* of its sexist language (as I did in the revised edition of *A Black Theology of Liberation* [Orbis, 1986) and also insert some references to [B]lack women. But I decided to let the language remain unchanged as a reminder of how sexist I once was and also that I might be encouraged never to forget it. It is easy to change the language of oppression without changing the sociopolitical situation of its victims. I know existentially what this means from the vantage point of racism.... The same kind of problem is beginning to emerge in regard to sexism. With the recent development of womanist theology as expressed in the articulate and challenging voices of Delores Williams, Jackie Grant, Katie Cannon, Renita Weems, Cheri Gilkes, Kelly Brown, and others, even African-American male ministers and theologians are learning how to talk less offensively about women's liberation. Many seem to have forgotten that they once used exclusive language. (xxviii-xxix)

I would be impressed by Cone's willful expression of his inner thoughts and feelings in *Black Theology and Black Power* concerning his theological stance to Black liberation. At the same time, his standpoint reinforced my critical consciousness of the ways sexism erased the activist contribution of womanist theology conceptualized by Black women. Cone's outspoken words of self-reflection that reinforced his radical perspective as an anti-sexist Black male teacher, minister, and theological scholar transformed my sense of community healing—wholistically in mind, body, and spirit. I learned from him that anti-racist theology involves struggle to end all forms of oppression. He enabled me to realize my ministerial calling in and outside academia. Moreover, noted Black theologian and professor Cornel West in his Introduction to the "50<sup>th</sup> anniversary edition" of Cone's book (2018), significantly underscores the life-transformative power of his writings:

We need more intellectual work like this: work that comes from the heart and the soul and mind, the type of intellectual work that the academy does not know what to do with it ... [I]n this text, Cone is dealing with not just the death of Martin [Luther King, Jr.], nor the death of so many freedom fighters of all colors, though disproportionately black. He is also dealing with the death of something in him; it is the death of the 'Negro' and the birth of 'blackness.' It is the death of a certain kind of deferential disposition to white supremacy in the hearts and minds and souls of black people themselves and the birth of a certain kind of self-assertiveness—a courage to be. (xi; xiii)

Once again, reading Cone's writing radically transformed my intellectual and theological standpoint, especially related to how I would teach courses in biblical studies, as well as African American literature. Truthfully, in the words of Cornel West, personally I "need[ed] more intellectual work like this: work that comes from the heart and the soul and mind...." Teaching anti-racism at the intersection of "the heart and the soul and mind," enabled me to resist the ideology of racial assimilationism in a PWI (Predominately White Institution). As Cone states, "... to ask blacks to act as if color does not exist, to be integrated into white society, is asking them to ignore both the history of white America and present realities.... Instead, in order for the oppressed black to regain their identity, they must affirm the very characteristic which the oppressor ridicules—*blackness* (*Black Theology and Black Power*, 20). What exactly is "*blackness*" related to Black identity? According to M. Keith Claybrook, Jr. in "Black Identity and the Power of Self-Naming" (September 10, 2021),<sup>5</sup> "Black identity is the most political social identity used to identify people of African descent in the United States." Aligned with Cone's interpretive view of Black identity politics, Claybrook further states:

Black activists in the 1960s and 70s redefined and recreated what it meant to be Black in the United States. Their efforts demanded dignity and human respect for people of African descent. Being Black was about the right to be self-naming, self-defining, self-determining, and exercising individual and collective agency.<sup>6</sup>

Ultimately, I would come to realize in studying James H. Cone's writings and those of Black feminist and womanist writers, like those of bell hooks among others, is that story-telling has and continues to function as an act of Black survival. In the Introduction to his book *My Soul Looks Back*, Cone writes, "Through the act of storytelling, the story teller receives a 'little extra strength' to 'keep on keeping on' even though the odds might be against him or her. Testimony is a spiritually liberating experience ...." (11). Cornel West, having shared his story in March 2021 about being denied tenure at Harvard University as a professor in its Divinity School and the Department of African American Studies (returning to teach at Union Theological Seminary)<sup>7</sup> views Cone's activism in *Black Theology and Black Power* as "fascinating." West is particularly drawn to Cone's willingness to share his own inner, emotional struggle for self-survival—especially after the death of Dr. King. West cites Cone's words: "This is a word to the oppressor, ... not in hope that he will listen (after King's death who can hope?) but in the expectation that my own existence will be clarified." West's response—



That is powerful, to me. It is existential crisis, self-examination, self-interrogation, self-clarification and, most importantly, self-justification. And I believe that it is a question all of us, including young people today, ought to ask a number of times in our lives. It is not just questioning one's self in terms of what one is doing; not just examining one's self in terms of trying to connect one's profession or vocation to a cause; a set of principles bigger than all of us. Rather, it is one's self-justification. Why is one doing what one is doing in the face of such unjustified suffering, unnecessary social misery, and unmerited pain in the world? How do you respond to that question? (xiv-xv)

As discussed in the Introduction to *Breaking Bread: Insurgent Black Intellectual Life* (from the beginning to the end of this book), bell hooks and Cornel West enact a serious "intellectual" dialogue confronting anti-Black racism. hooks states, the critical need for a "subject-to-subject recognition that is an act of resistance" ... toward a "decolonizing, anti-racist process" (5):

**bh [bell hooks]** ... we must first be able to dialogue with one another, to give one another that subject-to-subject recognition that is an act of resistance that is part of the decolonizing, anti-racist process. So to some extent, we invite all readers then to rejoice with us that this subject-to-subject encounter can be possible within a White supremacist, capitalist, patriarchal context that would, in fact, have us not be capable of talking to one another. (5)

West's response clearly aligns with her standpoint, as he states—

**CW [Cornel West]** This does not mean that we subscribe to an exclusive Afrocentricity, though we are centered on the African American situation. Nor does it mean that we valorize, that we promote a Euro-centric perspective, though we recognize that so much of the academy remains under the sway of a very narrow Euro-centrism. Instead we recognize Black humanity and attempt to promote the love, affirmation, and critique of Black humanity, and in that sense, we attempt to escape the prevailing mode of intellectual bondage that has held captive so many Black intellectuals of the past. (5-6)

Contemplating this as soul work, I have realized my calling for justice "in the face of such unjustified suffering, unnecessary social misery, and unmerited pain in the world."

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Karenga originated the term "Kwanzaa" in the Swahili phrase *matunda ya kwanza*, meaning "first fruits of the harvest."

<sup>2</sup> I first used this phrase in the title of the anthology I edited titled *Hooked on the Art of Love: bell hooks and My Calling for Soul Work*, BookLocker, 2019.

<sup>3</sup> The ordination took place at Angel Gabriel COGIC (Church Of God In Christ), the church named by my father, Rev. Frederick Gabriel Lemons who served as its Pastor.

<sup>4</sup> On the back cover of *Black Theology and Black Power*, the biographical statement reads: "James H. Cone, who died in 2018, was Bill and Judith Moyers Distinguished Professor of Systematic Theology at Union Theological Seminary. His many books included *A Black Theology of Liberation*, *Martin & Malcolm & America*, *Said I Wasn't Gonna Tell Nobody*, and *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, winner of the 2018 Grawemeyer Award in Religion. He was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences."

<sup>5</sup> I first read this article when one of my colleagues Dr. Cynthia Patterson shared it with me in an email on the day of its publication.

<sup>6</sup> [aaihs.org/black-identity-and-the-power-of-self-naming/](https://aaihs.org/black-identity-and-the-power-of-self-naming/)

<sup>7</sup> [www.the-crimson.com](http://www.the-crimson.com), "Harvard Reversed Course and Offered Cornel West Consideration for Tenure After Public Outcry, He Says," Meera S. Nair and Andy Z. Wang, *Crimson* Staff Writers, March 11, 2021.

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**Introduction**  
**Voices for the (R)evolutionary Value of “CHAT”**  
**Confronting Anti-Black Racism**  
**Gary L. Lemons**

The time to speak a counter hegemonic race talk that is filled with the passion of remembrance and resistance is now. All our words are needed. To move past the pain, to feel the power of change, transformation, revolution, we have to speak now—acknowledge our pain now, claim each other and our voices now.

bell hooks, *Killing Rage: Ending Racism*

**Grammatical Transgression**

**The Capitalization of “Black” and “Blackness” for Anti-Racist Consciousness**

Initially, when I began the editing process for this anthology, I called for each contributor to capitalize any reference to “Black” and/or “Blackness”—specifically related to African American identity. As shared in the “Preface,” I situated this request interconnected to my own journey in struggle to identify with Black identity and Blackness. Thus, the editorial progress toward the completion of *Liberation for the Oppressed* would be clearly linked to the years of my evolution to critical race, Black self-consciousness. Moreover, as I look back over the course of my education as an “English” major enrolled in PWIs (Predominately White Institutions) context—from undergraduate through graduate school—sadly I never considered the colonized, racial self-denial I internalized. More than ever, today I fully comprehend the life-threatening implications grounded in the erasure of my racial identity, both personally and politically. In truth, even in my dissertation “Black Men in Feminism: Race, Gender, and Representation in the Writings of Frederick Douglass and W.E.B. Du Bois” (332 pages, March 1992), through most of my published writings up to 2019—I never capitalized any references to “Black” or “Blackness” related to African American identity. In *Actuality*, I never considered *Black* as racially important to emphasize. Having read many African American writers before and after the 1960s Black Power movement who did or did not focus on a transgressive politic of capitalization, I never felt the need to align my scholarly production with a *pro-Black* grammatical agenda.

However, now publicly professing my inner need to demonstrate my allegiance to the Black Lives Matter movement, I intentionally in my scholarship capitalize on the liberatory agency of grammatical transgression in resistance to anti-Black racism. More than anything, I have come to reject ideas of what it means to be grammatically “correct”—particularly as it pertains to my Black identity. For all of my academic career, as a Black male student trained in canonical, white-male dominated British and American literature, I realize that my education was rooted in my being colonized to believe that academic excellence was/is about conforming to the correctness of whiteness. My academic training was never about my racial identity connected to being Black or possessing a love for Blackness. In truth, caught up in academic credibility and acceptance in PWIs, I had simply become the “invisible [*black*] man”.

In this contemporary moment when anti-Black racism has taken an even more deadly turn for the worst, my having arrived at a self-liberating place of Black critical race consciousness has been life-saving. In “Black Identity and the Power of Self-Naming,” M. Keith Claybrook, Jr. clearly points this out:

Contemporary scholars and writers have continued to engage the question of identity and terminology. Yaba Blay’s, *(I)ne Drop: Shifting the Lens on Race*, continues this discourse she states that, ‘capitalization is a matter of reality and respect—respect not only for other people but for myself.’ In regards to being Black, she argues, ‘My identity is important, and therefore I capitalize it.’ In 2014, Lori Tharps, ‘The Case for Black with a Capital B’ argues, ‘Black should always be written with a capital B. We are indeed a people, a race, a tribe. It’s only correct.’ Ultimately, being Black was not about color alone, but also self-definition self-determination, and an affinity towards Black people’s racialized socio-cultural group denoting their peoplehood. Designating Black not simply as an adjective but a pronoun bestows people of African descent human respect and dignity.<sup>1</sup>

The more and more I read writings by African American authors from the Black Power movement and in this contemporary moment, the more I have become critically aware of the anti-racist imperative for the capitalization of Black racial referentiality.

Considering the necessity for progressive, anti-racist conversations to be had between individuals—across differences of race, gender, class, sexuality, and ability—now is the time for “CHAT”. *Liberation for the Oppressed* represents a

calling for critically conscious folks to join together for the enactment of strategies devoted to the eradication of racism—at the intersection of all forms of systemic and institutionalized oppression. Specifically, in this context, advocating life survival for Black Indigenous People of Color in the U.S. must be actively engaged. Considering the emotional and physical trauma BIPOC communities have experienced in the past and continue to deal with in their everyday lives to this day, there must be a renewed call for liberating, anti-racist dialogues leading to activist self-transformation for social justice.

### **The Struggle for Racial Justice Must Continue, even as “We Wear the Mask”**

We wear the mask that grins and lies,  
It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes,—  
This debt we pay to human guile;  
With torn and bleeding hearts we smile,  
And mouth with myriad subtleties.

“We Wear the Mask,” Paul Laurence Dunbar

Considering the life-threatening implications of the COVID-19 pandemic, the lives of all people in the U.S. and globally have been challenged not only physically, but emotionally and mentally. The potentially deadly effects of the virus adversely impacted and traumatically affected people’s everyday lives in ways that will never be forgotten. From a personal and pedagogical standpoint, as a Black male college professor teaching African American literature in the wake of the pandemic and the murder of George Floyd, among many other Black folks, I have kept on my mask not only to survive, but also to hide the heart-breaking depth of my emotional trauma. Masking my inner pain didn’t just start with the deadly variants of COVID, it began when I was born as a *Black* American in a land founded constitutionally upon the institutionalization of white supremacy. In my life journey to survive it, I put on a (white) mask to assimilate into the life-saving privileges of *whiteness*—even if it made me “grin and lie”. I wore the mask to survive. The first time I read Paul Laurence Dunbar’s poem, “We Wear the Mask” was in a course on African American literature I taught in 2009 in the English department at USF. During the surge of the COVID pandemic, I purposely purchased a mask in the color “black”. I have continued to wear it wherever I go—in and outside my home. While no one has ever asked me about the color of my mask, even as I have seen whites, Blacks, and other people of color wearing a “black” mask, I always think about it in the context of Dunbar’s poem.

With “We Wear the Mask” in my thoughts every time I put on my “black” colored mask, I wear it not only to save my life from the deadly effects of COVID, I wear my “black” mask as a metaphorical representation of my heart-filled desire to own my *Blackness*—inside out. I no longer hide my feelings regarding my struggle to survive as a Black man in the U.S. In my study of and teaching African American literature, it has meant literally un-masking the history of my racialized colonization, having internalized the belief as a Black boy growing up in the South that “white was right”. Ridding myself of my white mask and replacing it with a “[B]lack” one changed the course of my personal life and my pedagogical practice—rooted in activist struggles in love for ending systemic and institutionalized oppression.

**Liberating Citations: “... creating a new culture, a place for the *beloved community*”**

I maintain that the call to end racism must be grounded in enlivened dialogues created by a unified, collective body of people committed in love for the liberation of *all* the oppressed. In this day and time, anti-racist solidarity means that these individuals must take on challenging conversations about ways systemic and institutionalized racism continues to be perpetuated. In *Killing Rage: Ending Racism* (1994), bell hooks writes:

Some days it is just hard to accept that racism can still be such a powerful dominating force in all our lives. When I remember all that black and white folks together have sacrificed to challenge and change white supremacy, when I remember the individuals who gave their lives to the cause of racial justice, my heart is deeply saddened that we have not fulfilled their shared dream of ending racism, of creating a new culture, a place for the *beloved community* (263).

For two decades, I have written about and taught writings by bell hooks. As I first wrote in *Black Male Outsider, Teaching as a Pro-Feminist Man, a Memoir* (2008). In this book, I begin by acknowledging the transformative impact of her presence in my life as a doctoral student and professor:

I will always be indebted to bell hooks, who coadvised my dissertation on the pro-woman(ist) writings of Frederick Douglass and W.E.B. Du Bois. Since then her writings on [B]lack masculinity, feminist memoir writing, and progressive education have immeasurably contributed to the foundation of the feminist antiracism I practice in the classroom (ix).

In 2019, I edited an anthology titled *Hooked on the Art of Love: bell hooks and My Calling for Soul Work*. Composed of writings and visual art by contributors—across differences of race, gender, class, sexuality, age, ability, and culture—I conceptualized this work inspired by hooks’ book *Art on My Mind: Visual Politics* (1995). As the Preface to *Hooked on the Art of Love*, I speak out directly to bell. I say—

Over the course of three decades—as I have continued to read, study, write about, and teach your writings—they would lead me on a course to self-liberation. As a self-defined, [B]lack feminist activist—you have taught me to put my life on the line (in the college classroom [and] in books I have written ... 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.... I have learned from you that *soul-work* is an essential form of self-activism. It’s ‘all about love’ (2).

Moreover, in *All about Love: New Visions* (2000), hooks claims the redemptive power of love for social justice “even in the face of great odds”—

Redeemed and restored, love returns us to the promise of everlasting life. When we love we can let our hearts speak.... On my kitchen wall hang four snapshots of graffiti I first saw on construction walls as I walked to my teaching job at Yale University years ago. The declaration, ‘The search for love continues even in the face of great odds,’ was paint in bright colors (xi; xv).

Her experiential vision of a beloved community follows that envisioned by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. during the Civil Rights movement. I, too, profess the life-saving power of this visionary community founded upon activist commitment to love for social justice. I have envisioned *Liberation for the Oppressed* as yet another liberating, dialogical text for the love of soul work.

In my pedagogical scholarship and its activist-oriented practice, I contend that confronting anti-Black racism is *all about love* for social justice. In “Beloved Community: A World without Racism,” the final chapter of *Killing Rage: Ending Racism* (1995)—hooks writes:

Some days it is just hard to accept that racism can still be such a powerful dominating force in all our lives. When I remember all that black and white folks together have sacrificed to challenge and change white supremacy, when I



remember the individuals who gave their lives to the cause of racial justice, my heart is deeply saddened that we have not fulfilled their shared dream of ending racism, of creating a new culture, a place for the *beloved community* (263).

Additionally, in *Writing Beyond Race: Living Theory and Practice* (2013), hooks consistently talks back to “imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy.” She says: “This phrase is useful precisely because it does not prioritize one system over another but rather offers us a way to think about the interlocking systems that work together to uphold and maintain cultures of domination” (4). With this in my mind and heart, throughout *Liberation for the Oppressed*, I “chat” about it as a strategic means to bring folks together—in and outside academia—committed to anti-racist alliance.

Each of the four Parts of *Liberation for the Oppressed* composes writings by individuals across differences of race, gender, class, sexuality, generation, and ability. Collectively, these folks represent the life-transforming power of my *Call to “CHAT.”* Advocating the practice of love for community alliance toward ending anti-Black racism, also many of the contributors strategically align their voices with struggles to end sexism, capitalism, homophobia, and ableism.

### **Part I: Black Men Breathing Together on the Emotional Freedom Train(ing): A 12-Track Journey for Black Male Self-Recovery**

As I note in the Preface to *Liberation for the Oppressed*, the acronym “CHAT” stands for “Community Healing through Activist Transformation.” I strategically employ it as the critical foundation for the University of South Florida Task Force 2020 Grant I received—“Understanding and Addressing Blackness and Anti-Black Racism in Local, National, and International Communities.” Conceptually, it enabled me and Black, Clinical Therapist Risasi Milima to create a six-month, 12-track, online, cyber-space journey for Black male well-being. From October 2020-March 2021, co-leading a community-based collaborative project, we titled it “Black Men for CHAT and the Emotional Freedom Train(ing): Get on Board!” We met with the participants two times each month during a one-and-a-half-hour online session over the course of the training process. In the context of the global traumatizing impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the racialized trauma related to the murder of George Floyd, Briana Taylor, and Ahmaud Arbery, among others—we and the participants challenged each other to dialogue about our feelings of racial trauma.

Moreover, with the participants, Risasi Milima and I were compelled to examine ways issues of systemic and institutionalized oppression were self-disheartening on multiple levels for the grant participants, as well as members of their families. Ultimately, during the Black men for CHAT, a 12-track EFT journey, the project aimed to promote meaningful conversations for self-recovery between the participants and those prompted by activist speakers included in the project (invited clinical therapists, professionals, consultants, and anti-racist allies) known for their liberating community-building service. Overall, there were 20 Black males who consistently participated in the monthly online sessions. During this self-emancipating EFT passage—Milima, the invited professional speakers, and I prompted the participants to produce self-reflective writings in response to subject matter and questions generated throughout the course of the sessions. Part I of *Liberation for the Oppressed* not only includes written responses by the Black male grant participants, as they dialogue about questions posed to them, it also composes written versions of presentations offered by the professional speakers who join us during the EFT12 tracks.

### **Connecting the EFT Tracks with My Vision for “CHAT”**

Considering the “Local, National, and International Communities” conceptual outreach of the USF Research Task Force Grant in 2020, I conceptualize *Liberation for the Oppressed*, as my activist demonstration of it. I purposely aimed to connect the Emotional Freedom Train(ing) 12-track project with the longstanding anti-Black racist stance I continue to practice in the college classroom. Collectively, in Part I-IV of this anthology, the contributors and I literally put our lives on the line as we write about what it means to talk about systemic racism. Also, having become critically aware of the self-deadening trauma of its internalization, we map the course of our critical anti-racist consciousness for self-recovery and community healing. In line with this strategic process of writing from the inside out as my vision of *soul work*, I hope our words will compel potential readers of this book to contemplate self-liberating ways to confront the emotional challenges that the subject of race and racism can provoke. Additionally, I hope that our writings will prompt readers to think about the life-saving power of unity for anti-racist allyship.

In this visionary configuration, liberatory alliance for racial justice stands to show that now is the time to end the trauma and dehumanizing effects of anti-Black racism. I contend with longstanding Black feminist scholar, cultural critic, and professor bell

hooks that silence about the traumatization of racism is complicated. In *Killing Rage: Ending Racism* (1995), hooks says that “to ‘talk race’”—in and of itself—is personally painful for her:

... I find myself reluctant to ‘talk race’ because it hurts. It is painful to think long and hard about race and racism in the United States. Confronting the great resurgence of white supremacist organizations and seeing the rhetoric and beliefs of these groups surface as part of accepted discourse in every aspect of daily life in the United States startles, frightens, and is enough to throw one back into silence (1;3).

At the same time, it is clear for hooks that silence is not the solution to the hurtful experience of racism. However, not only does it raise the issue of one’s “right”/choice not to talk about racial injustice, but it also exposes systemic and institutionalized ways many people—across racial differences—have been colonized to believe that racism is no longer a problem today. It only existed in the past. To be real, choosing not to talk about the harmful effects of racism simply perpetuates the history of its real, life-threatening outcomes.

Overall, as documented many of the writings in *Liberation for the Oppressed* personify hooks’ groundbreaking path to community healing in resistance to anti-Black racism. Many of the book’s contributors have learned ways to enhance the struggle for anti-racist self-recovery. Many of their writings align with my teaching strategies confronting the intersectional, deadly effects of systemic and institutionalized oppression. Many of the writers’ works function as life-saving evidence of unwavering dedication to freedom for *all* oppressed people. hooks also speaks about preeminent importance of self-decolonization for freedom from systemized oppression in *Outlaw Culture: Resisting Representations* (1994). She states, “When I look at my life, searching it for a blueprint that aided me in the process of decolonization, of personal and political self-recovery, I know that it was learning to look both inward and outward with a critical eye. Awareness is central to the process of life as the practice of freedom” (248). Writings not only by African Americans in Part I, but all those by contributors in Parts II-IV represent critical self-awareness for building community alliance against anti-Black racism within *and* beyond an academic context—across differences of race, gender, class, sexuality, and ability. More specifically, Parts II and III include writings by USF students who

studied with me in a graduate course I taught spring 2021 focused on books by bell hooks. One of them included *Killing Rage: Ending Race*.

### **Parts II and III Teaching While Black "Online": Once in a Life-Time**

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, having taught in-person, face-to-face college courses for more than two decades, I never had a desire to teach any of my courses online. Yet, I will always remember the deeply emotional experience of not returning to on-campus classrooms after spring break in March 2021 (to the end of the semester). During that spring semester, I taught two courses in African American literature—one for graduate students (as noted above, the other for undergraduate students). I titled the graduate course "bell hooks and Autocritography." I describe it as follows:

This course centers 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) which she wrote at age 19. In this course, we will map hooks' trajectory as a longstanding Black feminist-womanist cultural critic/theorist, scholar, and professor. As one of today's most activist voices in the struggle to eradicate all forms of systemic and institutionalized oppression—particularly related to representations of Blackness and African American identities—hooks positions the critical importance of intersectionality in her writings. Considering the effects of race, gender, class, sexuality, culture, ability, and generational lineage—in her life (her)stories, she strategically merges autobiography with social critique.

The undergraduate course focused on writings by a number of Black authors from the Harlem Renaissance to the present. Yet my intersectional approach to it (similar to the graduate course on hooks) sought "to foreground and to capture the complexities of Black identity and culture—across differences of gender, class, sexuality, abilities, and generational foundations. In these ways, [students would become critically conscious of] the multi-dimensionality of African American life and the cultural foundations of what it means to be 'Black'-identified in the United States." In this course, the students also read *Killing Rage: Ending Racism*. However, in line with USF's safety protocols in spring 2021, calling for a fully computer-generated version of the classroom environment in response to the pandemic, I strategically reconceptualize the syllabus for each course. Yet, in both courses, students still read this revolutionary text.

Teaching both my undergrad and graduate courses in this new cyber-space classroom in my home office caused me to spend much time during the remaining semester reflecting on the theory and practice of my anti-racist pedagogy. No longer did I experience what I now consider the “privilege” of face-to-face contact with my students. In the cyber-classroom, life for me and my students had to take a new *course* of action. In the meta-reality of this computer-generated, cybernetic environment—we had to rethink ways of being *real* with each other. As I’ve stated, in all the years of my teaching career, I never imagined or desired teaching online. However, having to teach online—considering the life-threatening effects of the COVID pandemic—I would come to realize how deeply I had taken for granted my privilege of teaching in-person. Yet, at the same time, I had no choice but to take on the challenge. I had been about literally engaging the face-to-face complex realities of being a Black male professor teaching African American literature in predominately white classrooms in a PWI context.

Teaching in an online classroom for the first time not only required that I had to revise my syllabi, it also challenged me personally to re-envision my approach to teaching and practicing anti-racism. However, in the new virtual space one technical aspect of it really resonated with me. During our online class discussions, students could either unmute their microphone and speak out in what I called “discussion starter participation.” On the other hand, if they preferred, they could write their comments in “chat”. More than in the face-to-face class meetings we had experience before the pandemic, in the online format students in both courses were much more willing to be openly honest in expressing and sharing their thoughts and feelings—especially related issues of racism. I, too, responded back in “chat” with comments. Openly conversing with my students via “chat” enlivened my hope that we could work through the trauma of the pandemic, even as we confronted the emotional trauma of white supremacy represented in bell hooks’ writings and those by other Black authors we studied in the undergrad African American literature course. While students were not required in either course to show their faces visually via the camera setting, it no longer became important to me that our conversations had to be visually documented in face-to-face screen imagery. However, during each of the on-line class sessions we met in both the undergrad and grad courses, I asked three to four students to lead class discussions. I did, however, request that they control their camera setting to allow everyone in class to see their faces. What I came to realize in this virtual classroom was that while seeing each of the students’ faces was visually engaging, it

became much more important to interact with them related to what they communicated in their "discussion starter" presentations and comments in "chat".

Talking race with students who willingly promoted social justice actually became more important than seeing their faces. The power of voices supporting freedom for the oppressed became the *face* what it means to be anti-racist. Black/students of color and white students in both courses boldly spoke out and wrote in resistance to anti-Black racist ideology, mythology and stereotypes—perpetrated historically and in this contemporary moment. Considering that each of the courses concentrated on a critique of anti-Black racism, as stated. I had students in both of them read and write responses to bell hooks' book *Killing Rage: Ending Racism*. I assigned this book for both courses because it clearly supports my vision of activist solidarity for anti-racist "CHAT" (community healing through activist transformation). In the last chapter of the book, "Beloved Community: A World Without Racism," hooks says,

To live in anti-racist society we must collectively renew our commitment to a democratic vision of racial justice and equality. Pursuing that vision we create a culture where *beloved community* flourishes and is sustained. Those of us who know the joy of being with folks from all walks of life, all, races, who are fundamentally anti-racist in their habits, need to give public testimony. We need to share not only what we have experienced but the conditions of change that make such an experience possible. The interracial circle of love that I know can happen because each individual present in it has made his or her [or their] own commitment to living an antiracist life and to furthering the struggle to end white supremacy will become a reality for everyone only if those of us who have created these communities share how they emerge in our lives and the strategies we use to sustain them (271-272).

### **Autocritography: Where the Personal and Professional Intersect**

[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 (7).

Michael Awkward, *Scenes of Instruction, a Memoir* (1999)

In the evolution of my pedagogical practice and activist-oriented scholarship in African American literary and cultural studies, I have sought to demonstrate critical connections between the personal and the professional. Over the course of time, while I have written about my personal experiences confronting racism, I have strategically linked them to my scholarly research and analysis of ways it also impacted the history of my professional career as a Black male student and professor in PWIs. At the same time, I would become committed to studying and teaching Black feminist and womanist critique of systemic and institutionalized oppression. Thus, in this academic context, I write and teach about ways anti-Black racism is interconnected to sexism, classism, homophobia, ableism, as well as other forms of systemized domination. Linking autobiographical narrative with my activist scholarly and pedagogical focus—in the words of Michael Awkward—my writing represents “an account of individual, social, and institutional conditions that help[ed] to produce [me as] a scholar and, hence, [my] professional concerns.” In fact, in *Caught Up in the Spirit! Teaching for Womanist Liberation* (2017), I write about Awkward’s conceptualization of autocritography and its impact on my approach to teaching for “CHAT” in African American literature:

Rather than lecture to my students as a ‘professorial expert’ in the field of [B]lack literary studies, I practice a way of teaching centered on critical dialogue between me and my students. Their written responses act as the framework for us to ‘talk-back’ to works by [B]lack authors we study. Together our voices interaction to create a conversational environment in the classroom that is rich and multi-layered. The key term in the written and verbal interaction I promote in this space is *collaboration* (59).

As I have shared, in spring semester 2021, the graduate course I taught focused on writings by bell hooks. The course was composed of 13 students, the majority of them white. Only three of the students identified as BIPOC. We began the semester studying *Ain’t I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (1981) hooks’ first published book. She wrote it at the age of 19. During the semester, while reading other writings by her, we mapped hooks’ trajectory as a longstanding Black feminist-womanist cultural critic/theorist, scholar, and professor. As one of today’s most activist voices

in the struggle to eradicate all forms of systemic and institutionalized oppression—particularly related to representations of Blackness and African American identities—hooks positions the critical importance of intersectionality in her writings. Considering the effects of race, gender, class, sexuality, culture, ability, and generational lineage—in her life (her)stories, she strategically merges autobiography with social critique. In *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (1995), bell hooks states:

Teaching is a performative act. And it is that aspect of our work that offers the space for change, invention, spontaneous shifts, that can serve as a catalyst ... that calls everyone to become more and more engaged, to become active participants in learning ... bearing witness to education as the practice of freedom (11).

Exploring how bell hooks employs autocritography as a pedagogical “performative act” in her writing style allowed us to engage it a strategic form of personal and professional learning style “bearing witness to education as the practice of freedom.” I also specified that students utilize Awkward’s rhetorical concept in the writings each of them produced in the course. I suggested that it would enable them to comprehend the range, depth, and scope of the revolutionary vision of feminism hooks advances in her writings.

Strategically, I conceptualized this graduate course as a means to advance the groundbreaking dimensions of the liberatory standpoint that hooks so boldly advocates as the foundation for critical personal reflection for self-recovery, healing, social, and political agency. In the course—as readers, writers, and teachers engaged in the study of writings by hooks—we applied autocritography as a critical, life-transformative genre to grapple with ways our own varying, complex identities influence our textual analyses of hooks’ works. First and foremost, through the study of hooks’ writings, we would comprehend her struggle in support of the eradication of historical and prevailing myths, stereotypes, and (mis)representations of Black identities in a culture of white supremacy, patriarchy, classism, and (hetero)sexism, and ableism. Secondly, our analysis of her writings would help us to understand more fully the discursive strategy she employs in (her)stories of what it means to be a Black feminist writer, professor and activist. In sum—as a Black feminist, theory-rich course grounded in the emancipatory literary, cultural, critical, and scholarly production of bell hooks—I envisioned it as forging a self-liberating path for student



commitment and investment in the preeminent legacy of hooks' intellectual and activist revolutionary *herstory*.

As my published writings document the transformative impact of hooks' works in my life, autocritography represents my longstanding commitment to the liberating power of Black feminist and womanist thought—in and outside the college classroom. I learned from hooks that the classroom can be a strategic location for the demonstration of teacher/student activism. As noted in *Black Male Outsider* I write about hooks challenging my one-dimensional, masculinist and (hetero)sexist ideas of Black manhood. Overall, many of her writings would become the groundwork for my personal, professional, and pedagogical practice actively supporting struggles to end all forms of systemized oppression.

### **Putting One's Life on the Line: Confronting Systemic, Racist Injustice**

In *Liberation for the Oppressed*, many of its contributors literally put their lives on the line in resistance to systemic and institutionalized racial oppression. In particular, many of them write openly about traumatic experiences they have or would face in what it means to “talk race” in opposition to racism at the intersection of other traumatizing forms of oppression and domination. Having become critically aware of the self-deadening effects of internalized racism, many of them map the course of their journey toward the practice of love for the oppressed. Having become critically conscious of their possible complicity with racism by not speaking out about its hurtful traumatizing effects—much like hooks, many of them employ personal narrative to speak out for the necessity of racist decolonization. Many of them support the need for alliance-building dialogue for social justice, as they address strategic ways to end racism interconnected to other forms of systemic domination. Overall, in Parts II and III, the contributors write in unity not only to address the painful, emotional challenges that the subject *and* experiences of racism can provoke in oneself, but also to envision paths to self-recovery—contemplating and acting for community healing.

### **Part IV: Mission Accomplished—Hope for a “Beloved Community”**

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 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. This is where we must go from here.

bell hooks, *Killing Rage: Ending Racism*

In communal solidarity with bell hooks' vision of what must guide us on a liberating path for "anti-racist communities of resistance" [to] emerge everywhere," indeed, the contributors in Part IV collectively voice their personal, political, and professional standpoints with individuals in Parts I-III promoting "a *beloved community* where borders can be crossed and cultural hybridity celebrated." Part IV also comprises writings about *Killing Rage: Ending Racism* by students who studied with me in my spring 2021 online, undergraduate African American literature course. Also, two essays in Part IV are written by individuals for whom I served as "major professor" for the completion of their doctoral work in literary studies.<sup>2</sup>

Further underscoring the critical need for ongoing anti-racist "CHAT" (as illustrated in the Conclusion to *Liberation for the Oppressed*) once again I create an imaginary "chat" with bell hooks as my longstanding Black feminist-womanist mentor. In this imagined dialogue, over the course of time, I share that she taught me (*r*)evolutionary ways to interrogate racism through the lens of intersectionality. Aligning it with ways to advocate struggles for liberating the oppressed across differences of identity, hooks radically opened my eyes to the complex, intersectional dynamics of systemic and institutionalized domination. Inspired by her representation of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s vision of a "beloved community," I called out to the contributors of *Liberation for the Oppressed* to illustrate "CHAT" as a soulful testament of the inner-healing power of anti-racist activism. Overall, as the Editor of this anthology during its production process, I witnessed holistically the revolutionary agency of the contributors' *movement* to write for "community healing through activist transformation." Ultimately, I believe the writings by Black Indigenous People of Color and those by white allies that compose this book will enable its readers to experience the liberating intervention of the Emotional Freedom Train(ing) for self-recovery, as conceptualized by Risasi Milima.

As a Black male professor committed to teaching against systemic and institutionalized oppression grounded in an anti-racist, intersectional standpoint—assigning students to read and write about *Killing Rage: Ending Racism* in my African American literature courses in spring semester 2021—I believe it challenged both me and my students willfully to confront the trauma of anti-Black racism. Collectively, our writings in *Liberation for the Oppressed* act as a motivational testament to the power of what hooks references as “engaged pedagogy”—

[It] necessarily values student expression.... When education is the practice of freedom, students are not the only ones who are asked to share, to confess. Engaged pedagogy does not seek simply to empower students. Any classroom that employs a holistic model of learning will also be a place where teachers grow, and are empowered by the process. That empowerment cannot happen if we refuse to be vulnerable while encouraging students to take risks.... Professor 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 enhance their capacity to live fully and deeply. (*Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* 20-22)

Hopefully, my interpretation and practice of “engaged pedagogy,” in complement with writings by my students in *Liberation for the Oppressed*, will inspire readers of it to contemplate the liberating power of anti-racist allyship—across differences of race, gender, class, sexuality, and ability. For me and *all* the writers in this book, it represents a hope-filled journey to a path of “self-actualization” as we long to find a “beloved community.” Once again, I assert that “CHAT” as the conceptual template for this book symbolizes the life-saving freedom of *soul work*.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Claybrook, Jr., M. Keith. "Black Identity and the Power of Self-Naming." [aaihs.org/black-identity-and-the-power-of-self-naming/](http://aaihs.org/black-identity-and-the-power-of-self-naming/) (September 10, 2021.)

<sup>2</sup> Scott Neumeister and Maggie Romigh each received a PhD. in literary studies in the Department of English at the University of South Florida.

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# 1

## **Words in Action: Liberatory Voices Speaking Out for Self-Recovery Gary L. Lemons**

We are rooted in language, wedded, have our being in words. Language is also a place of struggle. The oppressed struggle in language to recover ourselves—to rewrite, to reconcile, to renew. Our words are not without meaning. They are an action—a resistance. Language is also a place of struggle ... The most import of our work—the work of liberation—demands of us that we make a new language, that we create the oppositional discourse, the liberatory voice. Fundamentally, the oppressed person who has moved from object to subject speaks to us in a new way. This speech, this liberatory voice, emerges only when the oppressed experience self-recovery.

bell hooks, *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black* (1989)

I'd like somebody to mention that day that Martin Luther King, Jr., tried to give his life serving others. / I'd like for somebody to say that day that Martin Luther King, Jr., tried to love somebody. / I want you to say that day that I tried to be right on the war question. / I want you to be able to say that day that I did try to feed the hungry. / I want you to be able to say that day that I did try in my life to clothe those who were naked. / I want you to say on that day that I did try in my life to visit those who were in prison. / I want you to say that I tried to love and serve humanity. / Yes, if you want to say that I was a drum major, say that I was a drum major for justice. Say that I was a drum major for peace.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., *A Gift of Love: Sermons from Strength to Love and Other Preachings* (1963)

### **Longing for the Words and Labor for Life**

In this essay, I employ the self-emancipating words bell hooks articulated in *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black* and that which Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. documented in *A Gift of Love: Sermons from Strength to Love and Other Preachings*. Their inspirited discourse reaffirms my practice as a Black male activist teacher, scholar, and ordained minister. Over time, as I represent in the discussion

that follows, most of the scholarship I have produced concentrates on my pedagogical practice surrounding the liberating agency of self-recovery in resistance to anti-Black racism. For me, in *Talking Back* and *A Gift of Love* writings, bell hooks and Dr. King both speak words that demonstrate the power of love committed to ongoing struggles against racism.

However, as I have written and continue to teach, bell hooks directly speaks out against the interconnection between institutionalized oppression and domination—particularly rooted in “imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy.” In *Writing Beyond Race, Living Theory and Practice* (2013), she states:

When I first began to use the phrase *imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy* to characterize the interlocking systems that shape the dominator culture we live within, individuals would often tell me that they thought it was just too harsh a phrase. In the past ten years, when I’ve used the phrase at lectures, more often than not audiences respond with laughter was an expression of discomfort, that the true nature of our nation’s politics were being exposed. But as the laughter followed me from talk to talk I began to see it as a way to deflect attention away from the seriousness of the this time. (36)

More than ever, as I would come to know and teach, anti-Black racism is bound up in the historical, literally deadening ideology of white supremacy—as both writings by hooks and Dr. King maintain. However, in my pedagogical experiences talking with students about the dehumanizing implications of white supremacy—at the intersection of gender, class, sexuality, and ability—in courses I teach has never invoked laughter as a way to avoid dealing with it. Discussions with my students about the life-threatening effects of white supremacy in the lives of Black Indigenous People of Color in the U.S. has been challenging. My insisting that they speak out about the perpetuation of anti-Black racism, in addition to writing about it is especially difficult. Yet, considering trauma of racism many BIPOC are experiencing in this contemporary moment, in the classroom I openly share with students my need to take a deep breath when beginning discussions aimed to confront the traumatizing effects of white supremacy. In all honestly, engaging in anti-racist dialogue in and outside academia continually enables me to recover myself and embrace my *Black* identity. As my “gift of love,” it gives inspired meaning to who I am and my will to live free from the shackles of white supremacy. I write, teach, and act out words of freedom for my own survival.

Deep in my soul, I long for words of restoration, for reconciliation, for communal relationship with people standing against racism. I take hold of the “demand” to write for my life and the lives of all the oppressed—across differences of race, gender, class, sexuality, and ability. I have longed to be a member of a community of people acting to move those trod upon from “object to subject”. I tell my students that we must begin to speak to each other in “new way[s].” In and outside the college classroom, I employ anti-oppressive language to challenge everyone with whom I “chat” about the ill and deadly effects of white supremacy to envision a world without racism—a place where our hearts open up to the soulful agency of self-recovery for racial equality. Like bell hooks and Dr. King, I too long for a “beloved community” where individuals across borders of difference can be whole in mind, body, and soul. In this visionary community, we can live creatively, freely, and joyfully in love and labor for freedom of the dispossessed.

As a teacher and scholar of the visionary writings of bell hooks, I would come to realize the impact Dr. King’s labor as an activist for racial justice would have upon her as a Black feminist theorist, cultural critic, and professor. Over time, having contemplated the interconnection between the anti-racist standpoints of hooks and Dr. King, I have often imagined the two of them talking to each other about the meaning of a “beloved community.” As Dr. King conceptualized it, hooks has referenced this phrase many times in her writings, especially in her book *Killing Rage: Ending Racism*. It embodies King’s commitment to education for social justice, therefore, constituting an unwavering call for the enactment of critical anti-racist pedagogy.

In teaching the radical activism of hooks and Dr. King dedicated to racial equality and equal rights for the oppressed, I create a “chat” between the two them (based on their written and spoken words, across historical time-lines). In an imaginary interview, I link together their belief that racism will not end until the active practice of love to end systemic and institutionalized oppression begins. As hooks proclaims in *Writing Beyond Race: Living Theory and Practice* (2013), Dr. King’s words still radiate with hope in love with education for critical consciousness aimed to support community alliances in resistance to the injustice of racism.



## **A “Chat” with bell hooks and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.<sup>1</sup>**

### **For Community Healing through Activist Transformation**

**Gary:** Thank you bell and Dr. King for joining me in this conversation focused on the subject of education for critical anti-racist consciousness. To begin, bell one of the most compelling chapters in your book *Killing Rage: Ending Racism*, you title “Black Intellectuals: Choosing Sides” (226-39). Please share your intention for writing it.

**bell:** “Throughout much of our history in the United States, African Americans have been taught to value education—to believe that it is necessary for racial uplift, one of the means by which we can redress wrongs engendered by institutionalized racism. The belief that education was a way to intervene in white supremacist assumptions that black folks were intellectually inferior, more body than mind, was challenged when unprecedented numbers of black students entered colleges and universities, graduated with degrees, yet found that racist assumptions remained intact” (226).

**Gary:** So, the achievement of Black earning degrees in institutions of higher education has not been as successful in resistance to racism as many of us think?

**bell:** “It was challenged by the reality of racial assimilation—the creation of a cultural context wherein those educated black folks who had ‘made it’ often internalized white supremacist thinking about blackness. Rather than intervening in the status quo, assimilated educated black folks often became the gatekeepers, mediating between the racist white power structure and that larger mass of black folks who were continually assaulted, exploited, and/or oppressed. Nowhere was this trend more evident than in colleges and universities” (226).

**Gary:** Many times, I have written about the traumatic negativity of Black internalized, racial assimilationist thinking (“better white than black”). Honestly, for all the years of my academic training in PWIs (Predominately White Institutions), I never fully realized the dept of the “degrees” to which I had internalized white supremacy—until I began to study your writings (in the late 1980s as a doctoral student).

**bell:** “When militant black resistance to white supremacy erupted in the sixties with the call for black power, the value of education was questioned. The ways in which many educated black folks acted in complicity with the existing racist structure were

called out. Even though some black academics and/or intellectuals responded to the demand for progress education that would not reflect white supremacist biases, the vast majority continued to promote conservative and liberal notions of assimilation" (227).

**Gary:** Remembering the course of my assimilationist "success" experienced in PWIs as a Black student (as I have written) has been about self-recovery. In the majority white universities I attended, it was mostly about disconnecting myself from anything to do with "Black power." I was taught ways that complemented "liberal notions of [racial] assimilation" founded upon ideas of white privilege(s). From this standpoint, I successfully climbed up the ladder of the "ivory" tower. This was my goal for *higher* education.

### **Recognizing the Goal of "True Education"**

**Gary:** Dr. King, as bell has shared her critique of Black assimilation into white supremacist ideas of educational success, what do you think should be the goal of education?

**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, I believe you and bell are saying the same thing about the need for teaching critical consciousness—especially about "think[ing] critically" related to issues of race and one's "character." bell in your book *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (1994), you address the need for teachers to be risk-takers—openly sharing challenges they face in their personal experiences.

**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" (21).

"I made my commitment to intellectual life in the segregated [B]lack world of my childhood" (*Killing Rage: Ending Racism*, 227).

### **Being Vulnerable in the Classroom: Restoring our Mind, Body, and Spirit**

**Gary:** Please say more about the need for professors/teachers to be vulnerable with regard to sharing their life experiences with students in the classroom.

**bell:** “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.

*Progressive professors working to transform the curriculum so that it does not reflect biases or reinforce systems of domination are most often the individuals willing to take the risks that engaged pedagogy requires and to make their teach practices a site of resistance”* (my emphasis, *Teaching to Transgress*, 21).

**Gary:** Dr. King, you and bell link together the idea of self-reflection as a life-saving “function of education [that teaches all students] to think intensively and to think critically.” What I hear you both telling us is that “true education” for liberation is about challenging students *and* teachers to stand against all forms of oppression, in and outside the classroom, with the power to be free.

**bell:** “Black intellectuals who choose to do work that addresses the needs and concerns of black liberation struggle, of black folks seeking to decolonize their minds and imaginations, will find no separation has to exist between themselves and other black people from various class backgrounds.... The desire to share knowledge with diverse audiences while centralizing black folks and our struggle for self-determination, without excluding non-black audiences requires different strategies from those intellectuals normally to deploy disseminate work” (*Killing Rage: Ending Racism*, 234-5).

**Gary:** You both are saying that students and teachers need to become critically conscious of the dehumanizing effects of oppression across differences of systemic and institutionalized domination. bell, you, and Dr. King clearly point out that Black “struggle for self-determination” must include “CHAT” with “non-Black [activist] audiences.” Thus, teaching the need to address issues of social injustices rooted in racism must be linked to critical knowledge of classism as well—in and outside Black communities.

### **Teaching Against Systemic Oppression: “Now is Not the Time for Silence”<sup>2</sup>**

**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:** Dr. King, you and bell are telling us that we are all in the darkness of this day experiencing the trauma of COVID-19 and the systemic virus of racism at the intersection of other forms of oppression. We need to teach the light of the liberating power of anti-oppression. Dr. King you are right, "Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that." But when hatred is normalized in a racist, anti-Black Indigenous People of Color ideological context—the absence of love leads us all into the deadly darkness of white supremacist assimilationist thinking.

**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:** bell, as you have stated, many Blacks and People of Color in PWIs continue to struggle for inclusion, equity, and voice—as our presence and intellectual power may be dismissed. In liberal institutional settings, "Diversity" has become more like a "window-dressing" strategy. Many of us in higher education have put on what Black poet Paul Laurence Dunbar historically called the "*mask that grins and lies*"<sup>3</sup> to cover over our pain, sadness, and despair. However, as you write about your personal experience of racism in *Killing Rage: Ending Racism*, you pointedly express that Blacks should not hide "rage" against white supremacy—as it gives way to "dangerous apathy and hard-heartedness ... promot[ing] passive acceptance of victimization" (17).

**bell:** "Confronting my rage, witnessing the way it moved me to grow and change, I understood intimately that it had the potential not only to destroy but also to construct. Then and now I understand rage to be a necessary aspect of resistance struggle. Rage can act as a catalyst inspiring courageous action.... Racial hatred is real. And it is humanizing to be able to resist it with militant rage.

*Forgetfulness and denial enable masses of privileged black people to live the 'good life' without ever coming to terms with black rage. Addictions of all sorts, cutting across class, enable black folks to forget, take the pain and the rage away, replacing it with dangerous apathy and hard-heartedness. Addictions promote passive acceptance of victimization"* (my emphasis, 16-17).

**Gary:** bell you reinforce this point in the chapter "Refusing to Be a Victim" in *Killing Rage: Ending Racism*. Considering Black struggle against racism continues in this

day and time, please say more about the need for Black folk to end “passive acceptance of [our] victimization.”

**bell:** “White folks who want all black Americans to repudiate a victim-focused identity must be prepared to engage in a subject-to-subject encounter with [B]lack folks who are self-determining. To embrace this shift would be to open up to the very vision of full racial equality which [Dr.] King [you] found so many white Americans could not imagine. Those white Americans who are eager to live in a society that promotes and rewards racial equality must be willing to surrender outmoded perceptions of black neediness that socialize them to feel comfortable with us only when they are in a superior, caretaking role. Until masses of white Americans confront their obsessive need for a black victim who lacks the agency to call for an accounting that would really demand a shift in the structure of this society, the rhetoric of victimization will continue to flourish” (59).

### **Be a “Transformed Nonconformist” for Social Justice: The End of Victimhood**

**Gary:** Well, Dr. King, in chapter 2 of your book *A Gift of Love*, you teach and preach about the power of being a “Transformed Nonconformist.”

**Dr. King:** “Even [as] certain of our intellectual disciplines persuade us of the need to conform ... Success, recognition, and conformity are the bywords of the modern world where everyone seems to crave the anesthetizing security of being identified with the majority ... In spite of this prevailing tendency to conform, we [as lovers of the Divine Creator] have a mandate to be nonconformists ... *The hope of a secure and livable world lies with disciplined nonconformists who are dedicated to justice, peace, and brotherhood [and sisterhood]. The trailblazers in human, academic, scientific, and religious freedom have always been nonconformists. In any cause that concerns the progress of [human]kind, put your faith in the nonconformist!*” (my emphasis, 11; 17)

**Gary:** Rather than conform to racial standards of a society promoting white privilege(s)—we as Black Indigenous People of Color *and* committed, antiracist white people must reclaim our nonconformance to embrace liberatory ideas of “true education” for true self-transformation. Dr. King, in your vision of nonconformist education, where students and teachers embark upon a journey for the freedom of self-wholeness—in mind, body, and soul—will this path lead us to a new Civil Rights movement for the love of social justice education?

**Dr. King:** "Love is the only force capable of transforming an enemy into a friend ... Life's most persistent and urgent question is, 'What are you doing for others?'" ... The 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.... The call for intelligence is a call for openmindedness, sound judgment, and love for truth."

**Gary:** I agree. This is not a time just for folk to sit in "comfort and convenience." All of us should move and act out our stand for social justice and human rights for all oppressed Black Indigenous People of Color. bell, you, address this point in your book *Writing Beyond Race: Living Theory and Practice*.

**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)

**Gary:** Dr. King as you and bell affirm the hope-filled promise of "nonconformist" education for social justice, you are clearly telling us that this is not a time just for us to sit in classroom spaces of "comfort and convenience." In these "times of challenge and controversy," we must move, speak out, and stand together for the *love* of social justice.

### **"Infinite Hope [for] the Human Race": In Spite of ...**

**Gary:** Dr. King you spoke these words on Aug. 28, 1963, in your famous "I Have a Dream" speech from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C. Please repeat them here.

**Dr. King:** "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 black boys

and black girls [and children of all colors] 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 and bell, as we continue this conversation, what else would either of you like to say to us?

**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."<sup>4</sup>

**bell:** “The time to remember is now. The time to speak a counter hegemonic race talk that is filled with the passion of remembrance and resistance is now. All our words are needed. To move past the pain, to feel the power of change, transformation, revolution, we have to speak now—acknowledge our pain now, claim each other and our voices now.... In counter hegemonic race talk, I testify in this writing—bear witness to the reality that our many cultures can be remade, that this nation can be transformed, that we can resist racism and in the act of resistance recover ourselves and be renewed” (*Killing Rage: Ending Racism*, “Introduction,” 6-7).

### “Beloved Community: A World Without Racism”

**Gary:** bell in the last chapter of your book *Killing Rage: Ending Racism*, you express your feelings about the continued struggle to end racism, as you remember Dr. King’s vision of a “beloved community.” On page 263, you state: “Some days it is just hard to accept that racism can still be such a powerful dominating force in all our lives.”

At the same time, you remember the liberating power of the Civil Rights movement as it brought radical African Americans and whites together who believed in racial justice for Blacks in the U.S.

**bell:** “When I remember all that black and white folks together have sacrificed to challenge and change white supremacy, when I remember the individuals who gave their lives to the cause of racial justice, my heart is deeply saddened that we have not fulfilled their shared dream of ending racism, of creating a new culture, a place for the *beloved community*” (*Killing Rage: Ending Racism*, 263).

**Gary:** bell, I must say that in remembering Dr. King’s vision of hope for the creation of a beloved community—you really inspire your readers to believe that one day for those of us longing for an anti-racist society in the U.S. can be realized.

**bell:** “Many citizens of these United States still long to live in a society where *beloved community* can be formed—where loving ties of care and knowing bind us together in our differences. We cannot surrender that longing—if we do we will never see an end to racism ... Those of us ... who still cherish the vision of *beloved community* sustain our conviction that we need such bonding not because we cling to utopian fantasies but because we have struggled all our lives to create this community. I have struggled together with white comrades in the segregated South. Sharing that struggle we came to know deeply, intimately, with all our minds and hearts that we can all divest of racism and white supremacy if we so desire” (*Killing Rage: Ending Racism*, 263-4).

**Gary:** Clearly bell, you speak words of hope that you, Dr. King, envisioned. The both of you call us to remember the importance of action to center love for racial justice in longing for a *beloved community*. I will always remember the two of you envisioning this community where love must be the foundation for change.

**bell:** “... only by realizing that love in concrete political actions that might invoke sacrifice, even the surrender of one’s life, would white supremacy be fundamentally challenged. We [will realize] the sweetness of *beloved community*” (*Killing Rage: Ending Racism*, 265).

“[Dr. King, your] vision of living out lives based on a love ethic is the philosophy of being and becoming that could heal our world today. A prophetic witness for peace, an apostle of love, [you have] given us the map. [Your] spirit lights the way, leading to the truth that love in action is the spiritual path liberates” (*Writing Beyond Race: Living Theory and Practice*, 97).

**Gary:** Honestly, bell and Dr. King what I have heard *and* witnessed in this “chat” is your unwavering devotion to activist “love” for freedom to end racism. For me in this conversation, together your voices have been self-liberating. In your activist, inspired calling, you both clearly insist that racism will end only when there is a “subject-to-subject encounter” resistance to it. Without doubt, you tell us that we *and* our anti-racist allies must confront the racial injustice Black Indigenous People of Color in the U.S. continue to experience—triggered by the trauma of white supremacy. As this dialogue comes to a close, I sincerely thank each of you for the life-saving words you both have given in your sacrificial offering of communal solidarity. Education for critical anti-racist consciousness must continue.



***Higher Education for Critical Anti-Racist Consciousness: In and Beyond Academia***

As cited in my “Introduction” to *Liberation for the Oppressed*, I strategically link written responses by Black males who participated in the University of South Florida “Understanding and Addressing Blackness and Anti-Black Racism” research grant I received in 2020 with writings composed by students in my African American literature undergraduate and graduate courses I taught in spring 2021. This collaborative endeavor offered me yet another opportunity to form community alliances with individuals across differences of race, gender, class, sexuality, culture, generation, and ability. Conceptually connecting their writings to Dr. King’s vision of a “beloved community” and bell hooks’ ongoing commitment to it, I particularly envision my *Call to “CHAT”* as a continued, activist-oriented demonstration of resistance to the perpetuation of white supremacy.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> In this imaginary "chat", I include quotes by Dr. King as noted below in the Works Cited, as well as particular passages he wrote in his book *A Gift of Love: Sermons from Strength to Love and Other Preachings*.

<sup>2</sup> This phrase is the title of an essay by professor Fanni V. Green in *Building Womanist Coalitions: Writing and Teaching in the Spirit of Love* (2019).

<sup>3</sup> The title of Paul Laurence Dunbar's poem is "We Wear the Mask" (1895).

<sup>4</sup> Dr. King delivered these words on May 5, 1966, upon accepting the Planned Parenthood Federation of America's Margaret Sanger Award.

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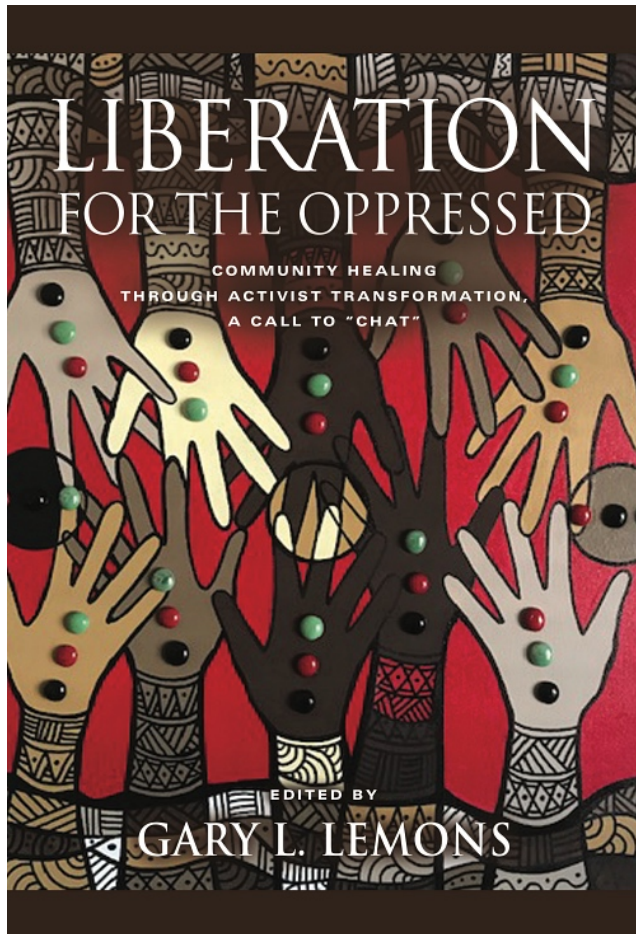
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