

# **Sisters of the Yam**

**BLACK WOMEN AND  
SELF-RECOVERY**

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questioning whether a new job was really what she would like to be doing and then leaving the high-powered administrative position, we are able to give each other positive feedback for taking risks and comfort when we make mistakes.

Unreconciled grief, sadness, and feeling that life has lost meaning are all states of being that lead black women into life-threatening depression. Loss is no respecter of age. Very young children suffer debilitating depression. This is all the more likely if they are living in an abusive, dysfunctional family. For some grown black women, the depressions we face can be traced back to childhood roots. Some of us hold our pain through years and years, letting it trouble our health. It would help contemporary black women to re-institutionalize meaningful death and dying rituals that older generations used that promoted healthy processes of grief, which taught us when and how to let go. All change can create sadness. It's when the sadness lingers that we can become stuck, mired, and unable to move. To the extent that black women are able to grapple with the larger reality of death and dying, we are better able to confront and cope with ongoing life-changes; we can move on. In the essay "Dying as the Last Stage of Growth," Mwalimu Imara argues that all change is a bit like dying: "Abandoning old ways and breaking old patterns is like dying, at least dying to old ways of life for an unknown new life of meaning and relationship. But living without change is not living at all, not growing at all. Dying is a precondition for living." With keen long-lasting insight, the ancestors were wise to teach us that "a body that knows how to die well will know how to live well." Collectively, black women will lead more life-affirming lives as we break through denial, acknowledge our pain, express our grief, and let the mourning teach us how to rejoice and begin life anew.

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### Moved by Passion: Eros and Responsibility

Reading black women's fiction we enter a world that unashamedly exposes the crisis in our "erotic" lives. That we have much to reconcile in relation to our sexualities and our sensualities is evident, whatever the sexual preference of the author. When I speak of eroticism here, it is not meant to evoke heterosexist images. I want to speak to and about that life-force inside all of us—there even before we have any clue as to sexual preferences or practices—that we identify as the power of the erotic. In her essay "Uses of the Erotic," Audre Lorde explains:

The very word *erotic* comes from the Greek word *eros*, the personification of love in all of its aspects—born of Chaos, and personifying creative power and harmony. When I speak of the erotic, then, I speak of it as an assertion of the life-force of women; of that creative energy empowered, the knowledge and use of which we are now reclaiming in our language, our history, our dancing, our loving, our work, our lives.

Significantly, black lesbian women have been at the forefront of our efforts to transform black females' relationship to the erotic. Audre Lorde's powerful essay was groundbreaking. It not only provided us with a blueprint for rethinking the erotic away from the context of patriarchy and heterosexism, it gave us permission to talk publicly about sexual pleasure. Black lesbian writers like Diane Bogus share their efforts to understand the development of their erotic politics by re-examining childhood, their relationships

within family. Bogus writes about her mother in the essay "Mom de Plume," sharing:

So, I watched how you managed this married/single state. Unaware that you were sick and growing sicker, I saw you work full time, cook, clean, see after my brothers and men, and fill us with an indelible mother-wit. It is from here, then, that my nameless, boundless adoration, my emulation grew. Maybe during those few, but intensely loving, copyist years, I xeroxed a subliminal image of you which I have since applied towards my own happiness. Maybe, then, my lesbianism is no more than your manless self-reliance turned into itself.

By willingly, publicly, interrogating the realm of the erotic, black lesbian feminist thinkers paved the way for all black women to exercise our right to know and understand the erotic politically.

Concretely, lesbian, bi-sexual, and black female sex radicals challenge those black women trapped in the confines of a hurtful oppressive heterosexist eroticism to recognize that we have choices. In urging us to reconsider our relation to our bodies, as well as the bodies of other black women, the field of eroticism was expanded and with promise of greater passion and pleasure. These positive interventions are crucial. All our eroticisms have been shaped within the culture of domination. Despite our choices and preferences, we act in an erotic and liberatory way towards ourselves and others only if we have dared to break free from the cultural norms.

More than ever before in our history, black women are working to articulate an "erotic metaphysic" that can give direction and meaning to our experience. Borrowing this term from philosopher Sam Keen, who uses it in his work *The Passionate Life*, "an erotic metaphysics" evokes a vision of life that links our sense of self with communion and community. It is based on the assumption that we become more fully who we are in the act of loving. Keen elaborates: "Within the tradition of erotic metaphysics, which goes back to Augustine and Plato, love is assumed to be prior to knowledge. We love in order to understand." To think of an erotic metaphysics in black women's lives is to automatically counter that stereotype version of our

reality that is daily manufactured and displayed in white-supremacist capitalist patriarchal culture.

Within a society where black women's bodies, our very beings, have been and are objectified in ways that deny our subjectivity, it has been incredibly difficult for black women to see the erotic as a space of power. Here it's important to distinguish the erotic from the sexual. Many black females learn early on how to objectify themselves, their bodies, and use their sexuality as a commodity that can be exchanged in the sexual marketplace. The black women who have internalized this way of thinking about their sexual selves, though they may appear "liberated," are in actuality completely estranged from their erotic powers. Their estrangement is just as intense as that of black females who have learned from childhood on that they can protect themselves from objectification, from commodification by repressing erotic energy, by denying any sensual or sexual dimension in themselves.

Just as breaking through denial is an initial stage in the healing process in other areas of our lives, it is equally true that black women will not be able to heal the wounded dimensions of our erotic lives until we assert our right to healing pleasure. Some of us are unable to imagine and create spaces of pleasure in our lives. When we are always busy meeting the needs of others, or when we are "used to pain," we lose sight of the way in which the ability to experience and know pleasure is an essential ingredient of wellness. Erotic pleasure requires of us engagement with the realm of the senses, a willingness to pause in our daily life transactions and enjoy the world around us. For many black females, the capacity to be in touch with sensual reality was perverted and distorted in childhood. Raised by authoritative, coercive parents who were only primarily concerned with producing obedient children, many of us learned as little girls that we would always be punished for pleasure, for not keeping our clothes neat, for any small act of spontaneity that did not coincide with their objectification of us. We have all known black parents who treat girl children like "dolls" and expect them to behave as though they are puppets on a string performing on command.

These environments did not promote the development of creative imagination or affirm a child's desire to explore the world fully. Sam Keen reminds us that the world of the child at play is the foundation that can shape or misshape our ability to feel:

In the play of the senses the child burrows beneath the boundaries of the persona. Touching, smelling, and tasting allow us to discover for ourselves if, and to what extent, the world makes sense. So long as we have bodies, we may retreat in to the sanctuary of experience. The senses are private oracles. When we consult them we discover a sacred bond that unites us to life.

For black children, this bond is often broken quite early. Many of us were made to feel as children that the world was completely unsafe, hence our capacity for wonder was repressed and fear took its place.

Touching as a way to experience reality was denied many of us as children. I was in a gift shop recently where a black child wanted to touch objects, to pick them up and look at them, the way other customers were doing. Her mother, however, kept insisting that she not touch anything, that if she did the people in the store might think she was stealing it. In so many public spaces, we can witness daily the way in which the curiosity of black children is suppressed. Taught not to reach out and touch objects in the world that invite interest and bring pleasure, many black children are socialized to think that this desire is "bad" and brings punishment. They learn to repress the desire to touch and the need to be touched. One of my sisters had to confront relatives who felt that she was touching her children "too much" and as a consequence was making them soft. Again the idea that black children must learn to be "tough" serves as the logic for denying them forms of physical bonding that communicate that their flesh is lovable, that it deserves tenderness and care.

Talking about ways individuals are rendered incapable of experiencing pleasure, Keen asserts: "Deprivation of bonding creates erotic poverty; erotic poverty gives rise to violence; violence further inhibits eros. We can't make love on a battlefield. The less care we receive, the less we are capable of giving." Young

black females often learn early that they will not get any of their needs for physical touch and nurturance met in any realm except the sexual. There are few studies that look at the connection between early sexual experience, that may or may not lead to teenage pregnancy, and the desire to find a space where one can express the need to be touched. When black females have been deprived of emotional nurturance that includes touch at early ages, we may not know how to distinguish those longings from sexual desire. Not knowing the difference we may engage in early sexual encounters in an attempt to meet needs that are not sexual.

How many young black girls are able to articulate to partners they just need to be caressed, touched, or held? Does sex become the only way they can experience touch because they do not know how to ask? How many grown black females are fully able to acknowledge the healing power of touch? Are we touched enough? Do we give black children the touching they need? Many of us were raised to be embarrassed by physical displays of affection. In their autobiographical writings, black women often describe growing up in families where there were no physical expressions of care. In *Young, Gifted, and Black*, Lorraine Hansberry confessed that her family did not touch, did not even speak of love:

If we were sick, we were sternly, impersonally and carefully nursed and doctored back to health. Fevers, toothaches were attended to with urgency and importance, one always felt *important* in my family. Mother came with a tray to your room with the soup and Vick's salve or gave the enemas in a steaming bathroom. But we were not fondled, any of us—head held to breast, fingers about that head—until we were grown, all of us, and my father died. At his funeral I at last, in my memory, saw my mother hold her sons that way, and for the first time in her life my sister held me in her arms I think. We were not a loving people: we were passionate in our hostility and affinities, but the caress embarrassed us. We have changed little.

Many of us have had a similar experience. It is only when we leave home and return as adults that expressions of love seem possible. What is it about distance that enables us to acknowledge emotional need? Does the caress embarrass us because it serves as an active reminder that we are flesh and in need of tender loving

care. Should we be surprised that a people whose bodies have been perpetually used, exploited, and objectified should now seek to turn flesh into armor?

When we consider the uses that this society has made of black women's bodies—as breeding machines, as receptacles for pornographic desires, as “hot pussies” to be bought and sold—surely our collective estrangement from a life-giving eroticism makes sense. Given the way patriarchy and notions of male domination inform the construction of heterosexual identity, the realm of black heterosexual sexual expression is rarely a place where black females learn to glory in our erotic power. Whereas black women's fictions narrate brutal destructive expressions of sexuality that mask themselves as desire between black men and women, black women's autobiographies rarely mention the realm of the sexual.

Paule Marshall's novel *Praisesong for the Widow* is unusual in its depiction of passionate lovemaking between a black man and woman that is rooted in mutual desire, in a shared longing to remain connected to creative black culture. Describing moments of sexual ecstasy that embrace this experience as sacred, Marshall writes:

He would lie within her like a man who has suddenly found himself inside a temple of some kind, and hangs back, overcome by the magnificence of the place, and sensing around him the invisible forms of the deities who reside there: Erzulie with her jewels and gossamer veils; Yemoja to whom the rivers and seas are sacred; Oya, first wife of the thunder god and herself in charge of winds and rains...Jay might have felt himself surrounded by a pantheon of the most ancient deities who had made their temple the tunneled darkness of his wife's flesh. And he held back, trembling a little, not knowing quite how to conduct himself in their presence.

For Jay and Avey, sexuality is a place that allows them to recover themselves, to be more fully alive. Yet, Marshall depicts Jay as losing touch with his sensuality and his sexuality when he becomes overly obsessed with acquiring material goods, with gaining economic power. Marshall is one of the few black writers who shows a connection between advanced capitalism and black

folks' consuming desire for goods that erases our will to experience the realm of the senses as a location of power and possibility.

If we listen to many contemporary black songs, rap and R&B, we can hear endless messages that make the space of erotic longing a site for exchange of goods, a site for the enactment of aggression. Listening to the pugilistic expression of sexual desire that is evoked in much male-centered rap music, we have to wonder what kind of sex young black people are having and ask ourselves why it is they connect sex with hostile aggressive acts, violence, even hatred. In white-supremacist culture, “blackness” is always made to be a sign of the anti-erotic. Whereas the black body may be sexualized, it is perpetually associated with negative sex thought (rape, disease). Fashion magazines tend to portray black women in ways that make their bodies appear “unnatural,” mannequin-like, twisted out of shape. Often black females are displayed in pseudo street-corner style clothing (as though we are prostitutes), wearing straight wigs, and our features distorted. These sexualized images do not empower black women onlookers. Are they there for the voyeuristic white gaze, to render us as “objects” or possessions once again?

To see black female bodies as sacred is to counter the cultural insistence that they are worthless and expendable. Sacred bodies enter the realm of sexuality knowing how to give honor. Discussing the question of attitude in *The Art of Sexual Ecstasy*, Margo Anand reminds us that self-love enables us to experience pleasure, a sense of the ecstatic: “Love begins at home, with loving yourself. By this I don't mean self-centered indulgence, but the ability to trust yourself and to listen to your inner voice, the intuitive guidance of your own heart. Loving yourself means that you realize that you deserve the experience of ecstasy...” Many black women are struggling to accept and love our bodies. For some of us that means learning to love our skin color. Others of us may love our blackness but mentally mutilate, cutting the body into desirable and undesirable parts. In Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved*, Baby Suggs preaches a prophetic sermon in the midst of nature, in the woods, calling on black folks to love our flesh:

"Here," she said, "in this place, we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it. Love it hard. Yonder they do not love your flesh. They despise it. They don't love your eyes; they'd just as soon pick em out. No more do they love the skin on your back. Yonder they flay it. And O, my people, they do not love your hands. Those they only use, tie, bind, chop off and leave empty. Love your hands! Love them. Raise them up and kiss them. Touch others with them, pat them together, stroke them on you face 'cause they don't love that either. You got to love it, you!

Baby Suggs continues to name various parts of our bodies calling us to love this flesh. For any black female working on self-recovery issues around body esteem, this would be a good meditation passage to read daily for insight and reflection.

Loving our flesh, celebrating it, includes the eroticism of language, the way we talk to one another. So often, we use harsh tones. We raise our voices. We forget how to use black vernacular speech in a manner that consoles, caresses, and delights. Yet, much more than standard English, we can speak in dialect or patois to bring an aura of pleasure and "down home" delight to our intimate encounters. This is why Paule Marshall calls attention to the way Jay and Avey talk to one another during lovemaking, engaging in a mutual dialogue of desire that intensifies their inter-subjectivity and diffuses the possibility that they will become narcissistic and forget to recognize one another. Dialogue is a powerful gesture of love. Caring talk is a sweet communion that deepens our bonds. We can show the depths of our care by the way we speak in all areas of our lives, both public and private. Our words can evoke the sense of respect and profound acknowledgment of how precious we are to one another. Language can convey a sense of the sacred.

Sacred sexuality begins when we touch our bodies in daily grooming. One of the truly special moments of tender caregiving occurs in *Praisesong for the Widow*, when Rosalie Parvey washes Avey's soiled body after she has made the difficult crossing to Carriacou. This bathing is ritualistic and healing. For black women it is an enchanting invitation to remember childhood baths when our bodies were touched and cleaned. It is a celebration of tender care that one black woman gives another even though they are

strangers. In this twilight sensual space, Avey experiences a reawakening of her senses; she feels herself alive again to touch, smell, and sound: "She gave herself over then to the musing voice and to such simple matters as the mild fragrance of the soap in the air and the lovely sound, like a sudden light spatter of rain, as the maid wrung out the washcloth from time to time over the water in the galvanized tub." Shame about our bodies often prevents black females from giving one another affirmation and physical care. And then extreme homophobic fear continues to inform black people's inability to touch one another. Eradicating homophobia would allow us to embrace each other across sexual preferences without fear.

In the introduction to her new book of poems *The Love Space Demands*, Ntozake Shange speaks to the way in which fear of AIDS is leading some black folks to promote sexual repression: "Our behaviors were just beginning to change when the epidemic began, moving sex closer to shame now than anything since I've been alive. Words that undermine trust and liberty to feel are creeping back into the bedrooms and couches of our lives so that we are always second guessing each other." Margo Anand's book affirms that ecstatic sexual pleasure can be experienced within the context of safe sex. The AIDS crisis, which is affecting our communities greatly (more than 50 percent of the women with AIDS are black), has heightened our awareness that we can honor each other most in the context of shared eroticism by bringing to desire an openness and willingness to share in words who we are and what we have experienced as well as what we want, all without fear.

This should always have been a dynamic in healthy sexual experience. For many women, and in particular black women who have never been able to articulate their sexual fears, needs, or longings, it is difficult to engage in open discussion prior to a sexual encounter. This fear leads many heterosexual black women to accept being sexual without a condom, because they do not wish to initiate the discussion of safe sex with partners. A healing eroticism enables us to assume responsibility for articulating all our concerns whenever we are sexually interested and involved. Audre Lorde

emphasizes that eroticism is frightening because it is life-affirming and calls us to resist any dehumanizing encounter. It is dehumanizing for women to submit to sex without condoms when they desire protection. As Lorde reminds us:

For once we begin to feel deeply all the aspects of our lives, we begin to demand from ourselves and from our life-pursuits that they feel in accordance with that joy which we know ourselves to be capable of. Our erotic knowledge empowers us, becomes a lens through which we scrutinize all aspects of our existence, forcing us to evaluate those aspects honestly in terms of their relative meaning within our lives.

Empowered by a healing eroticism, black women are able to envision and engage in sexual encounters that do not diminish our well-being. A number of married black women that I spoke to talked about continuing to feel compelled to have sex with their partners against their will. We know that this gesture is dangerous for it demands that we suppress authentic feelings and pretend. That suppression alone acts to estrange us from our bodies, to alienate us from our needs, so that we lose touch. It must be resisted.

Since so many black women have experienced traumatic physical abuse; we come to sexuality wounded. Irrespective of our sexual preference, we need to be with partners who are able to hear us define boundaries and limits. We need partners who are able to give us the loving care that makes sexual healing possible. Those of us who have learned to openly and honestly name that we are abuse survivors find that our willingness to take care of ourselves invites reciprocal recognition and care from our sexual partners. Shange shares the insight in *The Love Space Demands* that "when we don't know what we mean or why we are doing what we do, we are only able to bring chaos and pain to ourselves and others." Keen, in *The Passionate Life*, calls us to enter sexual encounters with our whole selves in a different way, but his message is similar:

A purely sensational approach to sex misses the paradox of pleasure. Human beings are not young forever, do not live in the perpetual moratorium of the game, and cannot isolate present sensations from associated feelings. We are multidimensional. Therefore pleasure is greatest when sensation (present awareness) feeling (past associations)

and intentions (future expectations) are unified in a single whole. If all the parts of the self are allowed to participate, everything feels better.

At the core of an erotic metaphysics is the urgent call to know and love who we are so that we can become more fully ourselves in the space of passion and pleasure.

Black women are often more passionate in our rage and suffering than we are in our loving. The energy that we bring to situations that arouse hostility or pain can easily be redirected. We can tell ourselves daily to direct our most intense feeling to those areas of our lives that bring pleasure and delight. To achieve this end we need to write ourselves many recipes for tuning into healing erotic power and put them in a box so that when we see our energies going toward anger or suffering we can take a recipe from the box and follow it. When I am in pain or feeling sad, I am often unable to imagine what activities might create a shift in feeling. A box full of ideas can serve as a reminder. Singing, dancing, walking, or sitting meditation can all be used as a practice to bring us back in touch with our bodies. Learning to be still, in sitting meditation, is one way we can be one with our bodies. Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh teaches that living in awareness, living mindfully, enables us to heal the wounded parts of ourselves. He encourages us to smile and smile often. We all know that black women often shut our faces down, turn them into impenetrable masks. Opening up our gaze is a gesture that can bring us closer to the outside world, making it more possible for us to experience joy and gratitude that we are alive, that we have another day on this earth in our bodies, that we can feel the body ecstatic.

As we attempt to envision a healing eroticism, Keen also encourages us to ask the question: "What forms of passion might make us whole? To what passions may we surrender with the assurance that we will expand rather than diminish the promise of our lives? Where may we look to catch a glimpse of the kind of passionate life that would heal both the psyche and the body politic?" These are important questions for black women seeking self-recovery. Those of us with feminist awareness find that the experience of passion in a non-sexist context is amazingly healing.

Without knowing that we hold within ourselves so much fear, we find in encounters with one another, with caring partners, that sexuality has often been a fearful site but that it can be a place where we can let the fear go, where we can recover and come back to ourselves. We find that celebrating our union with the natural world and our natural selves awakens our senses and gives us pleasure. We find that there is a healing eroticism in liberation struggle when we actively engage every aspect of our being to bring to black experience beauty, honor, respect, and vigilant caretaking. Recovering a healthy passion, black women discover that we can pause in the midst of everyday activities and feel again the sense of wonder, of pleasure that we are flesh, that we are one with the universe, that there is a life-force within us charged with erotic power that can transform and heal our lives.

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### Living to Love

Love heals. We recover ourselves in the act and art of loving. A favorite passage from the biblical Gospel of John that touches my spirit declares: "Anyone who does not know love is still in death."

Many black women feel that we live lives in which there is little or no love. This is one of our private truths that is rarely a subject for public discussion. To name this reality evokes such intense pain that black women can rarely talk about it fully with one another. *The Black Women's Health Book* had no chapter focusing specifically on love. And the only time the word was evoked in a chapter heading, it was in a negative context. The subject was domestic violence, the title "Love Don't Always Make It Right." Already, this title distorts the meaning of genuine love—real love does make it right. One of the major tasks black women face as we work for emotional healing is to understand more fully what love is so that we do not imagine that love and abuse can be simultaneously present in our lives. Most abuse is life-threatening, whether it wounds our bodies or our psyches. Understanding love as a life-force that urges us to move against death enables us to see clearly that, where love is, there can no disenabling, disempowering, or life-destroying abuse.

Because many black women make care synonymous with love, we confuse the issue. Care can take place in, for example, a familial context where there is also abuse, but this does not mean that love is present. In this chapter, I would like to offer ways to think about love that deepen our understanding of its meaning and practice. I

want to shed light on the way our specific historical experience as black people living in a racist society has made it difficult and at times downright impossible for us to practice the act and art of loving in any sustained way.

It has not been simple for black people living in this culture to know love. Defining love in *The Road Less Traveled* as "the will to extend one's self for the purpose of nurturing one's own or another's personal growth," M. Scott Peck shares the prophetic insight that love is both an "intention and an action." We show love via the union of feeling and action. Using this definition of love, and applying it to black experience, it is easy to see how many black folks historically could only experience themselves as frustrated lovers, since the conditions of slavery and racial apartheid made it extremely difficult to nurture one's own or another's spiritual growth. Notice, that I say, difficult, not impossible. Yet, it does need to be acknowledged that oppression and exploitation pervert, distort, and impede our ability to love.

Given the politics of black life in this white-supremacist society, it makes sense that internalized racism and self-hate stand in the way of love. Systems of domination exploit folks best when they deprive us of our capacity to experience our own agency and alter our ability to care and to love ourselves and others. Black folks have been deeply and profoundly "hurt," as we used to say down home, "hurt to our hearts," and the deep psychological pain we have endured and still endure affects our capacity to feel and therefore our capacity to love. We are a wounded people. Wounded in that part of ourselves that would know love, that would be loving. The choice to love has always been a gesture of resistance for African-Americans. And many of us have made that choice only to find ourselves unable to give or receive love.

Our collective difficulties with the art and act of loving began in the context of slavery. It should not shock us that a people who were forced to witness their young being sold away; their loved ones, companions, and comrades beaten beyond all recognition; a people who knew unrelenting poverty, deprivation, loss, unending grief, and the forced separation of family and kin; would emerge

from the context of slavery wary of this thing called love. Yet, some slaves must have dreamed that they would one day be able to fully develop their capacity to love. They knew first-hand that the conditions of slavery distorted and perverted the possibility that they would know love or be able to sustain such knowing.

Though black folks may have emerged from slavery eager to experience intimacy, commitment, and passion outside the realm of bondage, they must also have been in many ways psychologically unprepared to practice fully the art of loving. No wonder then that many black folks established domestic households that mirrored the brutal arrangements they had known in slavery. Using a hierarchical model of family life, they created domestic spaces where there were tensions around power, tensions that often led black men to severely whip black women, to punish them for perceived wrongdoing, that led adults to beat children to assert domination and control. In both cases, black people were using the same harsh and brutal methods against one another that had been used by white slave owners against them when they were enslaved. We know that life was not easy for the newly manumitted black slaves. We know that slavery's end did not mean that black people who were suddenly free to love now knew the way to love one another well.

Slave narratives often emphasize time and time again that black people's survival was often determined by their capacity to repress feelings. In his 1845 narrative, Frederick Douglass recalled that he had been unable to experience grief when hearing of his mother's death since they had been denied sustained contact. Slavery socialized black people to contain and repress a range of emotions. Witnessing one another being daily subjected to all manner of physical abuse, the pain of over-work, the pain of brutal punishment, the pain of near-starvation, enslaved black people could rarely show sympathy or solidarity with one another just at that moment when sympathy and solace was most needed. They rightly feared reprisal. It was only in carefully cultivated spaces of social resistance, that slaves could give vent to repressed feelings. Hence, they learned to check the impulse to give care when it was

most needed and learned to wait for a "safe" moment when feelings could be expressed. What form could love take in such a context, in a world where black folks never knew how long they might be together? Practicing love in the slave context could make one vulnerable to unbearable emotional pain. It was often easier for slaves to care for one another while being very mindful of the transitory nature of their intimacies. The social world of slavery encouraged black people to develop notions of intimacy connected to expedient practical reality. A slave who could not repress and contain emotion might not survive.

The practice of repressing feelings as a survival strategy continued to be an aspect of black life long after slavery ended. Since white supremacy and racism did not end with the Emancipation Proclamation, black folks felt it was still necessary to keep certain emotional barriers intact. And, in the world view of many black people, it became a positive attribute to be able to contain feelings. Over time, the ability to mask, hide, and contain feelings came to be viewed by many black people as a sign of strong character. To show one's emotions was seen as foolish. Traditionally in southern black homes, children were often taught at an early age that it was important to repress feelings. Often, when children were severely whipped, we were told not to cry. Showing one's emotions could lead to further punishment. Parents would say in the midst of painful punishments: "Don't even let me see a tear." Or if one dared to cry, they threatened further punishment by saying: "If you don't stop that crying, I'll give you something to cry about."

How was this behavior any different from that of the slave owner whipping the slave but denying access to comfort and consolation, denying even a space to express pain? And if many black folks were taught at an early age not only to repress emotions but to see giving expressions to feeling as a sign of weakness, then how would they learn to be fully open to love? Many black folks have passed down from generation to generation the assumption that to let one's self go, to fully surrender emotionally, endangers

survival. They feel that to love weakens one's capacity to develop a stoic and strong character.

When I was growing up, it was apparent to me that outside the context of religion and romance, love was viewed by grown-ups as a luxury. Struggling to survive, to make ends meet, was more important than loving. In that context, the folks who seemed most devoted to the art and act of loving were the old ones, our grandmothers and great grandmothers, our granddaddys and great granddaddys, the Papas and Big Mamas. They gave us acceptance, unconditional care, attention, and, most importantly, they affirmed our need to experience pleasure and joy. They were affectionate. They were physically demonstrative. Our parents and their struggling-to-get-ahead generation often behaved as though love was a waste of time, a feeling or an action that got in the way of them dealing with the more meaningful issues of life.

When teaching Toni Morrison's novel *Sula*, I am never surprised to see black female students nodding their heads in recognition when reading a passage where Hannah, a grown black woman, asks her mother, Eva: "Did you ever love us?" Eva responds with hostility and says: "You settin' here with your healthy-ass self and ax me did I love you? Them big old eyes in your head would a been two holes full of maggots if I hadn't." Hannah is not satisfied with this answer for she knows that Eva has responded fully to her children's material needs. She wants to know if there was another level of affection, of feeling and action. She says to Eva: "Did you ever, you know, play with us?" And again Eva responds by acting as though this is a completely ridiculous question:

Play? Wasn't nobody playin' in 1895. Just 'cause you got it good now you think it was always this good? 1895 was a killer girl. Things was bad. Niggers was dying like flies... What would I look like leapin' 'round that little old room playin' with youngins with three beets to my name?

Eva's responses suggest that finding the means for material survival was not only the most important gesture of care, but that it precluded all other gestures. This is a way of thinking that many black people share. It makes care for material well-being

synonymous with the practice of loving. The reality is, of course, that even in a context of material privilege, love may be absent. Concurrently, within the context of poverty, where one must struggle to make ends meet, one might keep a spirit of love alive by making a space for playful engagement, the expression of creativity, for individuals to receive care and attention in relation to their emotional well-being, a kind of care that attends to hearts and minds as well as stomachs. As contemporary black people commit ourselves to collective recovery, we must recognize that attending to our emotional well-being is just as important as taking care of our material needs.

It seems appropriate that this dialogue on love in *Sula* takes place between two black women, between mother and daughter, for their interchange symbolizes a legacy that will be passed on through the generations. In fact, Eva does not nurture Hannah's spiritual growth, and Hannah does not nurture the spiritual growth of her daughter, Sula. Yet, Eva does embody a certain model of "strong" black womanhood that is practically deified in black life. It is precisely her capacity to repress emotions and do whatever is needed for the continuation of material life that is depicted as the source of her strength. It is a kind of "instrumental" way of thinking about human needs, one that is echoed in the contemporary song Tina Turner sings—"What's love got to do with it?"

Living in a capitalist economy clearly informs the way black people think about love. In his essay, "Love and Need: Is Love a Package or a Message?" the Catholic monk Thomas Merton explains the way we are taught, via a market economy and the mass media that promotes it, to think of ourselves and of love as a commodity. His comments are worth quoting at length:

Love is regarded as a deal. The deal presupposes that we all have needs which have to be fulfilled by means of exchange. In order to make a deal you have to appear in the market with a worthwhile product, or if the product is worthless, you can get by if you dress it up in a good-looking package. We unconsciously think of ourselves as objects for sale on the market...In doing this we come to consider ourselves and others not as persons but as *products*—as "goods," or in other

words, as packages. We appraise one another commercially. We size each other up and make deals with a view to our own profit. We do not give ourselves in love, we make a deal that will enhance our own product, and therefore no deal is final.

Since so much of black life experience has been about the struggle to gain access to material goods, it makes sense that many of us not only over-value materiality but that we are also more vulnerable to the kind of thinking that commodifies feelings and makes it appear that they are only another kind of "material" need that can be satisfied within the same system of exchange used with other goods.

The combined forces of racist and sexist thinking have had a particularly negative influence on black women's attitudes about our relation to material goods. Not only have we been socialized to think of our bodies as a "product" to be exchanged, we are also made to feel that it is our responsibility to deliver needed products to others. Given that so many black women are the sole providers in black households, as Eva is in *Sula*, it is not surprising that we are often obsessed with material comfort, with finding the means to provide material well-being for ourselves and others. And, in this role, black women may be most unwilling to cultivate the practice of loving. We may be quite dedicated to caring for the needs of others, particularly material needs. Our need to love and be loved may be fundamentally denied, however. After all, it is ultimately "easier to worry about how you gonna' get a dollar to buy the latest product than it is to worry about whether there will be love in your house."

Love needs to be present in every black female's life, in all of our houses. It is the absence of love that has made it so difficult for us to stay alive or, if alive, to live fully. When we love ourselves we want to live fully. Whenever people talk about black women's lives, the emphasis is rarely on transforming society so that we can live fully, it is almost always about applauding how well we have "survived" despite harsh circumstances or how we can survive in the future. When we love ourselves, we know that we must do more than survive. We must have the means to live fully. To live fully, black women can no longer deny our need to know love.

If we would know love, we must first learn how to respond to inner emotional needs. This may mean undoing years of socialization where we have been taught that such needs are unimportant. Let me give an example. In her recently published book, *The Habit of Surviving: Black Women's Strategies for Life*, Kesho Scott opens the book sharing an incident from her life that she feels taught her important survival skills:

Thirteen years tall, I stood in the living room doorway. My clothes were wet. My hair was mangled. I was in tears, in shock, and in need of my mother's warm arms. Slowly, she looked me up and down, stood up from the couch and walked towards me, her body clenched in criticism. Putting her hands on her hips and planting herself, her shadow falling over my face, she asked in a voice of barely suppressed rage, "What happened?" I flinched as if struck by the unexpected anger and answered, "They put my head in the toilet. They say I can't swim with them." "They" were eight white girls at my high school. I reached out to hold her, but she roughly brushed my hands aside and said, "Like hell! Get your coat. Let's go."

Straight-away it should be evident that Kesho was not learning that her emotional needs should be addressed at this moment. In her next sentences she asserts: "My mother taught me a powerful and enduring lesson that day. She taught me that I would have to fight back against racial and sexual injustice." Obviously, this is an important survival strategy for black women. But Kesho was also learning an unhealthy message at the same time. She was made to feel that she did not deserve comfort after a traumatic painful experience, that indeed she was "out-of-line" to even be seeking emotional solace, and that her individual needs were not as important as the collective struggle to resist racism and sexism. Imagine how different this story would read if we were told that as soon as Kesho walked into the room, obviously suffering distress, her mother had comforted her, helped repair the damage to her appearance, and then shared with her the necessity of confronting (maybe not just then, it would depend on her psychological state, whether she could emotionally handle a confrontation) the racist white students who had assaulted her. Then Kesho would have known, at age thirteen, that her emotional well-being was just as

important as the collective struggle to end racism and sexism—that indeed these two experiences are linked.

Many black females have learned to deny our inner needs while we develop our capacity to cope and confront in public life. This is why we can often appear to be functioning well on jobs but be utterly dysfunctional in private. You know what I am talking about. Undoubtedly you know a black woman who looks together, in control on the job, and when you drop by her house unexpectedly for a visit, aside from the living room, every other space looks like a tornado hit it, everything dirty and in disarray. I see this chaos and disorder as a reflection of the inner psyche, of the absence of well-being. Yet until black females believe, and hopefully learn when we are little girls, that our emotional well-being matters, we cannot attend to our needs. Often we replace recognition of inner emotional needs with the longing to control. When we deny our real needs, we tend to feel fragile, vulnerable, emotionally unstable, and untogether. Black females often work hard to cover up these conditions. And we cover up by controlling, by seeking to oversee or dominate everyone around us. The message we tell ourselves is, "I can't be falling apart because I have all this power over others."

Let us return to the mother in Kesho's story. What if the sight of her wounded and hurt daughter called to mind the mother's deep unaddressed inner wounds? What if she was critical, harsh, or just downright mean, because she did not want to break down, cry, and stop being the "strong black woman?" And yet, if she had cried, her daughter might have felt her pain was shared, that it was fine to name that you are in pain, that we do not have to keep the hurt bottled up inside us. What the mother did was what many of us have witnessed our mothers doing in similar circumstances—she took control. She was domineering, even her physical posture dominated. Clearly, this mother wanted her black female presence to have more "power" than that of the white girls.

A fictional model of black mothering that shows us a mother able to respond fully to her daughters when they are in pain is depicted in Ntozake Shange's novel *Sassafrass, Cypress and Indigo*.

Throughout this novel, Shange's black female characters are strengthened in their capacity to self-actualize by a loving mother. Even though she does not always agree with their choices she respects them and offers them solace. Here is part of a letter she writes to Sassafrass who is "in trouble" and wants to come home. The letter begins with the exclamation: "Of course you can come home! What do you think you could do to yourself that I wouldn't love my girl?" First giving love and acceptance, Hilda later chastises, then expresses love again:

You and Cypress like to drive me crazy with all this experimental living. You girls need to stop chasing the coon by his tail. And I know you know what I'm talking about...Mark my words. You just come on home and we'll straighten out whatever it is that's crooked in your thinking. There's lots to do to keep busy. And nobody around to talk foolish talk or experiment with. Something can't happen every day. You get up. You eat, go to work, come back, eat again, enjoy some leisure, and go back to bed. Now, that's plenty for most folks. I keep asking myself where did I go wrong? Yet I know in my heart I'm not wrong. I'm right. The world's going crazy and trying to take my children with it. Okay. Now I'm through with all that. I love you very much. But you're getting to be a grown woman and I know that too. You come back to Charleston and find the rest of yourself. Love, Mama

It troubled me that it was difficult to find autobiographical narratives where black daughters describe loving interactions with black mothers. Overall, in fiction and autobiography, black mothers are more likely to be depicted as controlling, manipulative, and dominating, withholding love to maintain power over. If, as Jessica Benjamin suggests in *The Bonds of Love*, it is "mutual recognition" that disrupts the possibility of domination, then it is possible to speculate that black women who suffer a lack of recognition often feel the need to control others as a way to be noticed, to be seen as important. In Kesho's story the mother refuses to see her daughter's pain. By erasing her pain, she also erases that part of herself that hurts. And the message she gives is you can deny pain by the experience of power, in this case the power to return to a setting where you have been hurt and demand retribution. If black women were more loved and loving, the need

to dominate others, particularly in the role of mother, would not be so intense. It is healing for black women who are obsessed with the need to control, to be "right," to practice letting go.

The great black civil rights activist Septima Clarke names that her personal growth was enhanced by letting go of the need to be in control. For her this meant unlearning dependency on hierarchical models that suggest the person in power is always right. At one time she believed that whites always knew better than blacks what was good for our well-being. In *Ready from Within*, she declares:

Because I had a very strong disciplined mother, who felt that whatever she had in her mind was right, I felt that whatever I had in my mind was right, too. I found out that I needed to change my way of thinking, and in changing my way of thinking I had to let people understand that their way of thinking was not the only way.

The art and practice of loving begins with our capacity to recognize and affirm ourselves. That is why so many self-help books encourage us to look at ourselves in the mirror and talk to the image we see there. Recently, I noticed that what I do with the image that I see in the mirror is very unloving. I inspect it. From the moment I get out of bed and look at myself in the mirror, I am evaluating. The point of the evaluation is not to provide self-affirmation but to critique. Now this was a common practice in our household. When the six of us girls made our way downstairs to the world inhabited by father, mother, and brother, we entered the world of "critique." We were looked over and told all that was wrong. Rarely did one hear a positive evaluation.

Replacing negative critique with positive recognition has made me feel more empowered as I go about my day. Affirming ourselves is the first step in the direction of cultivating the practice of being inwardly loving. I choose to use the phrase "inwardly loving" over self-love, because the very notion of "self" is so inextricably bound up with how we are seen by and in relation to others. Within a racist/sexist society, the larger culture will not socialize black women to know and acknowledge that our inner lives are important. Decolonized black women must name that reality in accord with others among us who understand as well that

it is vital to nurture the inner life. As we examine our inner life, we get in touch with the world of emotions and feelings. Allowing ourselves to feel, we affirm our right in be inwardly loving. Once I know what I feel, I can also get in touch with those needs I can satisfy or name those needs that can only be satisfied in communion or contact with others.

Where is the love when a black woman looks at herself and says: "I see inside me somebody who is ugly, too dark, too fat, too afraid—somebody nobody would love, 'cause I don't even like what I see;" or maybe: "I see inside me somebody who is so hurt, who is just like a ball of pain and I don't want to look at her 'cause I can't do nothing about that pain." The love is absent. To make it present, the individual has to first choose to see herself, to just look at that inner self without blame or censure. And once she names what she sees, she might think about whether that inner self deserves or needs love.

I have never heard a black woman suggest during confessional moments in a support group that she does not need love. She may be in denial about that need but it doesn't take much self-interrogation to break through this denial. If you ask most black women straight-up if they need love—the answer is likely to be yes. To give love to our inner selves we must first give attention, recognition, and acceptance. Having let ourselves know that we will not be punished for acknowledging who we are or what we feel we can name the problems we see. I find it helpful to interview myself, and I encourage my sisters to do the same. Sometimes it's hard for me to get immediately in touch with what I feel, but if I ask myself a question, an answer usually emerges.

Sometimes when we look at ourselves, and see our inner turmoil and pain, we do not know how to address it. That's when we need to seek help. I call loved ones sometimes and say, "I have these feelings that I don't understand or know how to address, can you help me?" There are many black females who cannot imagine asking for help, who see this as a sign of weakness. This is another negative debilitating world view we should unlearn. It is a sign of personal power to be able to ask for help when you need it. And we

find that asking for what we need when we need it is an experience that enhances rather than diminishes personal power. Try it and see. Often we wait until a crisis situation has happened when we are compelled by circumstance to seek the help of others. Yet, crisis can often be avoided if we seek help when we recognize that we are no longer able to function well in a given situation. For black women who are addicted to being controlling, asking for help can be a loving practice of surrender, reminding us that we do not always have to be in charge. Practicing being inwardly loving, we learn not only what our souls need but we begin to understand better the needs of everyone around us as well.

Black women who are *choosing* for the first time (note the emphasis on choosing) to practice the art and act of loving should devote time and energy showing love to other black people, both people we know and strangers. Within white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy, black people do not get enough love. And it's always exciting for those of us who are undergoing a process of decolonization to see other black people in our midst respond to loving care. Just the other day T., whom I mention in another chapter, told me that she makes a point of going into a local store and saying warm greetings to an older black man who works there. Recently, he wanted to know her name and then thanked her for the care that she gives to him. A few years ago when she was mired in self-hate, she would not have had the "will" to give him care. Now, she extends to him the level of care that she longs to receive from other black people when she is out in the world.

When I was growing up, I received "unconditional love" from black women who showed me by their actions that love did not have to be earned. They let me know that I deserved love; their care nurtured my spiritual growth. Black theologian and mystic Howard Thurman teaches us that we need to love one another without judging. Explaining this in an essay on Thurman's work, Walter Fluker writes:

According to Thurman, there is within each individual a basic need to be cared for and understood in a relationship with another at a point that is beyond all that is good and evil. In religious experience, this inner

necessity for love is fulfilled in encounter with God and in relation to others, the person is affirmed and becomes aware of being dealt with totally.

Many black people, and black women in particular, have become so accustomed to not being loved that we protect ourselves from having to acknowledge the pain such deprivation brings by acting like only white folks or other silly people sit around wanting to be loved. When I told a group of black women that I wanted there to be a world where I can feel love, feel myself giving and receiving love, every time I walk outside my house, they laughed. For such a world to exist, racism and all other forms of domination would need to change. To the extent that I commit my life to working to end domination, I help transform the world so that it is that loving place that I want it to be.

Nikki Giovanni's "Woman Poem" has always meant a lot to me because it was one of the first pieces of writing that called out black women's self-hatred. Published in the anthology *The Black Woman*, edited by Toni Bambara, this poem ends with the lines: "face me whose whole life is tied up to unhappiness cause it's the only for real thing i know." Giovanni not only names in this poem that black women are socialized to be caretakers, to deny our inner needs, she also names the extent to which self-hate can make us turn against those who are caring toward us. The black female narrator says: "how dare you care about me—you ain't got no good sense—cause i ain't shit you must be lower than that to care." This poem was written in 1968. Here we are, more than twenty years later, and black women are still struggling to break through denial to name the hurt in our lives and find ways to heal. Learning how to love is a way to heal. That learning cannot take place if we do not know what love is. Remember Stevie Wonder singing with tears in his eyes on national television: "I want to know what love is. I want you to show me."

I am empowered by the idea of love as the will to extend oneself to nurture one's own or another's spiritual growth because it affirms that love is an action, that it is akin to work. For black people it's an important definition because the focus is not on

material well-being. And while we know that material needs must be met, collectively we need to focus our attention on emotional needs as well. There is that lovely biblical passage in "Proverbs" that reminds us: "Better a dinner of herbs, where love is, than a stalled ox and hatred therewith."

When we as black women experience fully the transformative power of love in our lives, we will bear witness publicly in a way that will fundamentally challenge existing social structures. We will be more fully empowered to address the genocide that daily takes the lives of black people—men, women, and children. When we know what love is, when we love, we are able to search our memories and see the past with new eyes; we are able to transform the present and dream the future. Such is love's power. Love heals.