

all about love

NEW VISIONS



bell hooks

“a warm affirmation that love is possible.”

—*NEW YORK TIMES BOOK REVIEW*

ALL ABOUT LOVE

N E W V I S I O N S

bell hooks



Perennial

An Imprint of HarperCollins Publishers

A hardcover edition of this book was published in 2000
by William Morrow and Company, Inc.

ALL ABOUT LOVE. Copyright © 2000 by Gloria Watkins. All rights reserved. Printed in the United States of America. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any matter whatsoever without written permission except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews. For information address HarperCollins Publishers Inc., 10 East 53rd Street, New York, NY 10022.

HarperCollins books may be purchased for educational, business, or sales promotional use. For information please write: Special Markets Department, HarperCollins Publishers Inc., 10 East 53rd Street, New York, NY 10022.

First Perennial edition published 2001.

Designed by Jo Anne Metsch

The Library of Congress has catalogued the hardcover edition as follows:

Hooks, Bell.

All about love : new visions / Bell Hooks

p. cm.

ISBN 0-688-16844-2

1. Love. 2. Feminist ethics I. Title.

BF575.L8 H655 2000 99-35253

306.7—dc21

CIP

ISBN 0-06-095947-9 (pbk.)

01 02 03 04 05 RRD 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3

w9.1
7

Praise for bell hooks's
all about love

"It is a warm affirmation that love is possible and an attack on the culture of narcissism and selfishness."

—*New York Times Book Review*

"A gracefully written volume . . . her treatise offers a deeply personal and—in this age of chicken-soupy psychobabble—unabashedly honest view of relationships."

—*Entertainment Weekly*

"Her vision seems idealistic . . . ambitious. Yet it touches a yearning we all have and is expressed so sincerely. . . . hooks's *New Visions* reminds us that we can be a part of a loving community."

—*Philadelphia Inquirer*

"Pay attention to bell hooks. The American writer and cultural critic is becoming a household word . . . hooks's writing typically inspires, enlightens and provokes. She is an academic wild card, the brilliant feminist whose sharp mind can slice the latest scholarly shibboleth."

—*Boston Globe and Mail*

"She provides a refreshing spiritual treatise that steps outside the confines of the intellect and into the wilds of the heart."

—*Seattle Weekly*

"Every page offers useful nuggets of wisdom to aid the reader in overcoming the fears of total intimacy and of loss. . . . hooks's view of amour is ultimately a pleasing, upbeat alternative to the slew of books that proclaim the demise of love in our cynical time."

—*Publishers Weekly*

"A spiritual handbook, weighty with platitudes, yet refreshed with some thoughtful analyses that offer seekers a way to explore love's meaning, or meaninglessness."

—*Kirkus Reviews*

"*All About Love: New Visions* promises to be one of the most engaging, life-affirming reads of the year. Come to it with an open mind, and an open heart, and prepare to be transformed."

—*Black Issues Book Review*

"Like love, this book is worth the commitment."

—*Toronto Sun*

ALSO BY BELL HOOKS

Remembered Rapture: The Writer at Work

A Woman's Mourning Song

Wounds of Passion: A Writing Life

Reel to Real: Race, Sex, and Class at the Movies

Bone Black: Memories of Girlhood

Killing Rage: Ending Racism

Art on My Mind: Visual Politics

Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom

Outlaw Culture: Resisting Representations

Sisters of the Yam: Black Women and Self-Recovery

Black Looks: Race and Representation

Breaking Bread: Insurgent Black Intellectual Life
(with Cornel West)

Yearning: Race, Gender and Cultural Politics

Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black

Feminist Theory from Margin to Center

Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism

the first love letter i ever wrote was sent to you. just as this book was written to talk to you. anthony— you have been my most intimate listener. i will love you always.

in the song of solomon there is this passage that reads: “i found him whom my soul loves. i held him and would not let him go.” to holding on, to knowing again that moment of rapture, of recognition where we can face one another as we really are, stripped of artifice and pretense, naked and not ashamed.

Preface

WHEN I WAS a child, it was clear to me that life was not worth living if we did not know love. I wish I could testify that I came to this awareness because of the love I felt in my life. But it was love's absence that let me know how much love mattered. I was my father's first daughter. At the moment of my birth, I was looked upon with loving kindness, cherished and made to feel wanted on this earth and in my home. To this day I cannot remember when that feeling of being loved left me. I just know that one day I was no longer precious. Those who had initially loved me well turned away. The absence of their recognition and regard pierced my heart and left me with a feeling of brokenheartedness so profound I was spellbound.

Grief and sadness overwhelmed me. I did not know what I had done wrong. And nothing I tried made it right.

No other connection healed the hurt of that first abandonment, that first banishment from love's paradise. For years I lived my life suspended, trapped by the past, unable to move into the future. Like every wounded child I just wanted to turn back time and be in that paradise again, in that moment of remembered rapture where I felt loved, where I felt a sense of belonging.

We can never go back. I know that now. We can go forward. We can find the love our hearts long for, but not until we let go grief about the love we lost long ago, when we were little and had no voice to speak the heart's longing. All the years of my life I thought I was searching for love I found, retrospectively, to be years where I was simply trying to recover what had been lost, to return to the first home, to get back the rapture of first love. I was not really ready to love or be loved in the present. I was still mourning—clinging to the broken heart of girlhood, to broken connections. When that mourning ceased I was able to love again.

I awakened from my trance state and was stunned to find the world I was living in, the world of the present, was no longer a world open to love. And I noticed that all around me I heard testimony that lovelessness had become the order of the day. I feel our nation's turning away from love as intensely as I felt love's abandonment in my girlhood. Turning away we risk moving into a wilderness

P R E F A C E


of spirit so intense we may never find our way home again. I write of love to bear witness both to the danger in this movement, and to call for a return to love. Redeemed and restored, love returns us to the promise of everlasting life. When we love we can let our hearts speak.

Introduction

GRACE: TOUCHED BY LOVE

It is possible to speak with our heart directly. Most ancient cultures know this. We can actually converse with our heart as if it were a good friend. In modern life we have become so busy with our daily affairs and thoughts that we have lost this essential art of taking time to converse with our heart.

—JACK KORNFIELD

N MY KITCHEN wall hang four snapshots of graffiti art 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 painted in bright colors. At the time, recently separated from a partner of almost fifteen years, I was often overwhelmed by grief so profound it seemed as though an immense sea of pain was washing my heart and soul away. Overcome by sensations of being pulled underwater, drowning, I was constantly searching for anchors to keep me afloat, to pull me back safely to the shore. The declaration on the construction walls with its childlike drawing of unidentifiable animals always lifted my spirits. Whenever I passed this site, the affirmation of love's possibility sprawling across the block gave me hope.

Signed with the first name of local artist, these works spoke to my heart. Reading them I felt certain the artist

was undergoing a crisis in his life, either already confronting loss or facing the possibility of loss. In my head I engaged in imaginary conversations about the meaning of love with him. I told him how his playful graffiti art anchored me and helped restore my faith in love. I talked about the way this declaration with its promise of a love waiting to be found, a love I could still hope for, lifted me out of the abyss I had fallen into. My grief was a heavy, despairing sadness caused by parting from a companion of many years but, more important, it was a despair rooted in the fear that love did not exist, could not be found. And even if it were lurking somewhere, I might never know it in my lifetime. It had become hard for me to continue to believe in love's promise when everywhere I turned the enchantment of power or the terror of fear overshadowed the will to love.

One day on my way to work, looking forward to the day's meditation on love that the sight of the graffiti art engendered, I was stunned to find that the construction company had painted over the picture with a white paint so glaringly bright it was possible to see faint traces of the original art underneath. Upset that what had now become a ritual affirmation of love's grace was no longer there to welcome me, I told everyone of my disappointment. Finally someone passed on the rumor that the graffiti art had been whitewashed because the words were a reference to individuals living with HIV and that the

artist might be gay. Perhaps. It is just as likely that the men who splashed paint on the wall were threatened by this public confessing of a longing for love—a longing so intense it could not only be spoken but was deliberately searched for.

After much searching I located the artist and talked with him face-to-face about the meaning of love. We spoke about the way public art can be a vehicle for the sharing of life-affirming thoughts. And we both expressed our grief and annoyance that the construction company had so callously covered up a powerful message about love. To remind me of the construction walls, he gave me snapshots of the graffiti art. From the time we met, everywhere I have lived I have placed these snapshots above my kitchen sink. Every day, when I drink water or take a dish from the cupboard, I stand before this reminder that we yearn for love—that we seek it—even when we lack hope that it really can be found.

THERE ARE NOT many public discussions of love in our culture right now. At best, popular culture is the one domain in which our longing for love is talked about. Movies, music, magazines, and books are the place where we turn to hear our yearnings for love expressed. Yet the talk is not the life-affirming discourse of the sixties and seventies, which urged us to believe “All you need is love.” Nowadays the most popular messages are those that de-

clare the meaningless of love, its irrelevance. A glaring example of this cultural shift was the tremendous popularity of Tina Turner's song with the title boldly declaring, "What's Love Got to Do with It." I was saddened and appalled when I interviewed a well-known female rapper at least twenty years my junior who, when asked about love, responded with biting sarcasm, "Love, what's that—I have never had any love in my life."

Youth culture today is cynical about love. And that cynicism has come from their pervasive feeling that love cannot be found. Expressing this concern in *When All You've Ever Wanted Isn't Enough*, Harold Kushner writes: "I am afraid that we may be raising a generation of young people who will grow up afraid to love, afraid to give themselves completely to another person, because they will have seen how much it hurts to take the risk of loving and have it not work out. I am afraid that they will grow up looking for intimacy without risk, for pleasure without significant emotional investment. They will be so fearful of the pain of disappointment that they will forgo the possibilities of love and joy." Young people are cynical about love. Ultimately, cynicism is the great mask of the disappointed and betrayed heart.

When I travel around the nation giving lectures about ending racism and sexism, audiences, especially young listeners, become agitated when I speak about the place of

love in any movement for social justice. Indeed, all the great movements for social justice in our society have strongly emphasized a love ethic. Yet young listeners remain reluctant to embrace the idea of love as a transformative force. To them, love is for the naive, the weak, the hopelessly romantic. Their attitude is mirrored in the grown-ups they turn to for explanations. As spokesperson for a disillusioned generation, Elizabeth Wurtzel asserts in *Bitch: In Praise of Difficult Women*: "None of us are getting better at loving; we are getting more scared of it. We were not given good skills to begin with, and the choices we make have tended only to reinforce our sense that it is hopeless and useless." Her words echo all that I hear an older generation say about love.

When I talked of love with my generation, I found it made everyone nervous or scared, especially when I spoke about not feeling loved enough. On several occasions as I talked about love with friends, I was told I should consider seeing a therapist. I understood that a few friends were simply weary of my bringing up the topic of love and felt that if I saw a therapist it would give them a break. But most folks were just frightened of what might be revealed in any exploration of the meaning of love in our lives.

Yet whenever a single woman over forty brings up the topic of love, again and again the assumption, rooted in

sexist thinking, is that she is “desperate” for a man. No one thinks she is simply passionately intellectually interested in the subject matter. No one thinks she is rigorously engaged in a philosophical undertaking wherein she is endeavoring to understand the metaphysical meaning of love in everyday life. No, she is just seen as on the road to “fatal attraction.”

Disappointment and a pervasive feeling of brokenheartedness led me to begin thinking more deeply about the meaning of love in our culture. My longing to find love did not make me lose my sense of reason or perspective; it gave me the incentive to think more, to talk about love, and to study popular and more serious writing on the subject. As I pored over nonfiction books on the subject of love, I was surprised to find that the vast majority of the “revered” books, ones used as reference works and even those popular as self-help books, have been written by men. All my life I have thought of love as primarily a topic women contemplate with greater intensity and vigor than anybody else on the planet. I still hold this belief even though visionary female thinking on the subject has yet to be taken as seriously as the thoughts and writings of men. Men theorize about love, but women are more often love’s practitioners. Most men feel that they receive love and therefore know what it feels like to be loved; women often feel we are in a constant state of yearning, wanting love but not receiving it.

In philosopher Jacob Needleman's primer *A Little Book About Love*, virtually all the major narratives of love he comments on are written by men. His list of significant references doesn't include books written by women. Throughout my graduate school training for a doctorate in literature, I can recall only one woman poet being extolled as a high priestess of love—Elizabeth Barrett Browning. She was, however, considered a minor poet. Yet even the most nonliterary student among us knew the opening line of her most well-known sonnet: "How do I love thee? Let me count the ways." This was in pre-feminist days. In the wake of the contemporary feminist movement, the Greek poet Sappho has now become enshrined as another love goddess.

Back then, in every creative writing course the poets dedicated to the love poem were always male. Indeed, the partner I left after many years first courted me with a love poem. He had always been emotionally unavailable and not at all interested in love as either a topic for discussion or a daily life practice, but he was absolutely confident that he had something meaningful to say on the subject. I, on the other hand, thought all my grown-up attempts to write love poems were mushy and pathetic. Words failed me when I tried to write about love. My thoughts seemed sentimental, silly, and superficial. When writing poetry in my girlhood, I had felt the same confidence I would come to see in my adult life only in male writers.