

WOUNDS OF PASSION

a writing life



bell hooks

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An Owl Book

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WOUNDS OF PASSION

*in loving memory
of a life we shared . . .*

*in gratitude for a love
that gave me courage to write
a love that calls me to remember
and let the past go*

what is lost because it is most precious
what is most precious because it is lost
—Amiri Baraka

Preface

To be born a girl in the fifties and years before was to enter a world where folks still believed that the most important event of a young woman's coming of age was marriage. Those of us who were not fantasizing about a white wedding and the man of our dreams knew we were freaks. We knew better than to speak our longings. From age ten on I dreamed of becoming a writer. Books were my ecstasy and just as I wanted to curl up in my tiny attic room bed and be transported far away, I dreamed of writing words that would offer someone else the same pleasure. The grown-ups believed too much reading endangered a young girl's future. Many of us were told early on that men don't like smart women. My daddy made it plain to mama that he thought all this book learning I was doing was going to my head—ruining my chances of a future. He could see clearly that I was

already choosing a life of the mind over anything else. My problem in his eyes was not just that I wanted to be a thinker but that I wanted to talk ideas—to debate and discuss. And he believed if men did not like a too smart woman they really did not like one with too much mouth.

Mama seemed to accept the fact that I would never become a “real” woman, someone who would know how to take care of man and children. She decided for me early on that I would use my mind and become a schoolteacher. In those days schoolteachers were always unmarried women. One never heard of them having sex or love. There were no children of their own in their lives. They had chosen a life of reading and thinking—a life that put them out of reach. Since they were not “real” women they were beyond the realm of desire. Passion we were led to believe was not in them. They were reserved except when sharing knowledge with little minds. Their lives were calm and discreet. They were constantly watched. In many ways they had to be much more virtuous than women with husbands and hungry mouths to feed. This was to have been my destiny.

My father was right. Too much book learning changed me. I was mapping a different destiny. Drawing from the life and works of Emily Dickinson, the Brontës, I knew that I could have both solitude to write and communion with like-minded souls to make life sweet.

When I journeyed to college in the early seventies I was surprised to find a different version of the same sexist thinking about women’s roles I had heard in my small

town Kentucky home. It did not concern marriage. It concerned the question of writing. In all my English classes, taught mostly by white males, there was a hostile undercurrent around a debate contemporary feminist movement had brought to the fore: could women be great writers.

Nowadays, almost everyone takes it for granted that there are great women writers, with the possible exception of old school patriarchs committed to maintaining a sexist social order at all costs. Yet this was a dominant way of thinking in our culture not that long ago. Challenging and changing this assumption has been one of the incredible unheralded triumphs of contemporary feminist movement. I vividly recall the heated debates we had at Stanford University in courses taught by women writers and professors about whether or not women would seize this new day and write our hearts out. The one cultural shift that was seen as opening the door for women to become great writers was the invention of the birth control pill. Often those individuals who believed women could not be the equals of men in the writing world thought that females would fail to realize creative potential because their time would be consumed by caring for home, husband, and children. Then there was the more progressive bohemian male thinker/writer who believed that one needed experience and adventure to write. Much of that adventure would be sexual exploits, experiences formed in the streets and back alleys, and through traveling. The single woman adventurer risked

rape and/or unwanted pregnancy. And a woman heavy with child certainly had no place on the road. Birth control changed all this.

As way back as Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* the assumption that the heartbeat of great writing was not just a powerful imagination but a sense of the world led insightful women to urge that females seek adventure, grow and develop their minds and body, take risks so that they could and would "find the words to say." With the contemporary invention of the birth control pill coupled with a cultural movement toward sexual liberation, the female writer no longer had any excuse. She could roam the world, engage in random sexual exploits and not lose her virtue. Now whether or not women had the stamina to be great writers or even to write at all would be tested as never before. Our feminist women professors were encouraging their promising brilliant students to be daring, to explore our minds and our bodies to the fullest. We were the generation given permission to go where no woman had gone before. We were encouraged to chart new journeys, to make our own maps. We were inspired to act with the conviction that gender differences could not stand in our way; the barriers, such as they were, could be overcome.

In her course on contemporary poetry our inspiring unconventionally beautiful professor Diane Middlebrook (noted author of the controversial biography of poet Anne Sexton) handed us photocopied sheets of poetry. There were no authors' names on the work. Her lecture

was on the entire issue of whether gender could be determined by writing style and content. Her experiment in class that day showed that it was not easy to tell the gender of the writer. I still recall the relief I felt that day. A burden had lifted. She had shown us that there was no basis in reality for the biased sexist stereotypes that were so often taught by other professors as fact. I left class assured that I could write work that was both specific to my experience as a southern black female as well as rooted in different locations and different perspectives.

Unlike many of my classmates who were repudiating relationships with men, convinced as they were that it would be too difficult for a woman to find her writing voice overshadowed by male presence, I was eager to find the “right” man. Once the anxiety about partnership was no longer ruling my life I was convinced I could settle down and pay attention to to what really mattered—becoming a writer. To strike up a partnership with a male who was also an aspiring writer was seen as sealing a woman’s fate. She would always remain in the shadows. Those of us who rejected this logic idealized the relationship between Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre. We were unwilling to choose between love and work. They had shown (or so we thought then) that it was possible to have a liberated sexuality in the context of a committed partnership of equals.

In those days I was writing poetry. Among contemporary poets, I worshiped at the throne of Robert Creeley and Adrienne Rich. I met the man I would live with for

way more than ten years first at a Gary Snyder poetry reading. And then again at a reading where Thom Gunn read from what was then still a new work, *Moly*.

Tall dark and aloof, the man whom I had heard many folks describe as looking like a Benin sculpture had chosen to feast his eyes and attention on me. I was nineteen years old. He was only seven years older. Together, I believed we would make a partnership centered on our work as poets, our love of words. We would defy old notions that it was unproductive for a young woman writer to live with a more established male writer. Already he was seen by his professors as a serious writer. He was a graduate student completing his Ph.D. focusing on poetics. I was a determined undergraduate. As young black writers in a poetry world that was predominately white, we stood out. When we entered poetry readings we were noticed. Contrary to the concerns raised in women's studies classes and feminist groups, I was confident that ours would not be a relationship where the woman's writing would be overshadowed by her man's. We vowed to nurture and sustain one another. That was our dream and that was the way it was for most of the years we spent together.

No doubt what might have easily become tense competitive circumstance was soon mediated by the fact that I began to concentrate less on writing poetry and more on feminist theory. My desire to write nonfiction was totally affirmed by my partner. Years ago when folks would ask how it was I came to write my first book, *Ain't I*

a Woman: Black Women and Feminism at nineteen, I would always share that it was after listening to me complain endlessly about the absence of material about black women in my courses that my partner urged me to write my own book—to tell my story. In those days women-only audiences critiqued me for giving so much credit to a man. Yet I knew the idea was his. And I wanted to give public testimony about this gesture of support because I believed it was important to give concrete examples of men supporting feminist movement (especially a black man as they were the group often seen as most sexist).

At that time I was not yet self-confident enough to think I could write a book. His suggestion was a gift I cherished and took to heart. He helped me every step of the way with research, listening to ideas, living with my heartache during the endless rewriting, and enduring the waiting years before any publisher accepted the work. In our life and work, we were both committed to experimentation, to a bohemian vision. In some ways I broke the pact of our artistic aesthetic vision of creating life as a work of art by becoming more and more involved in feminist politics. During the more than twelve years that we lived in the same house together I wrote two books. He finished graduate school, became a tenured professor. I also finished a Ph.D. in English but by that time serious conflicts had emerged—conflicts that did not go away. Our life was bittersweet.

Even when it became painfully evident that our relationship needed to end, I refused to accept that we

should part. In the world I came from, folks stayed together forever. I wanted that for myself. I dreamed of being like my eccentric maternal grandmother and grandfather who had spent more than seventy years in marriage and companionship. I wanted us to stay together through thick and thin as my parents had. My writing life had taken root and blossomed in the shelter and sanctuary of our bond. More than anything I feared losing the writing discipline I had worked so hard to cultivate were I to leave this relationship. Unlike the French writer Colette, I never needed or desired a caring partner to lock me in a room so that I could write. However I relied on the solace of knowing that after long hours spent quietly writing I could walk out of my study and find sweet and familiar companionship.

These passionate years of mutual partnership centered on commitment to creative work, to engaging an aesthetics of living, were central to my development as a writer. During this time I created the foundation for a writing life that would sustain me and sustains me still. In *Wounds of Passion: A Writing Life* I return to these years, taking a critical reflective look at the experiences that most shaped me. Just as my first memoir *Bone Black: Memories of Girlhood* was not a traditional autobiography, this book of ruminations on the early years of my writing life draws together the concerns that women (of all races and classes) dreaming of becoming writers faced as a consequence of movements for sexual liberation and feminist struggle. The pressing issues of whether

women could have love and write, whether we could be sexual adventurers and use those experiences as imaginative groundwork, and whether we could be the intellectual equals of men yet garner recognition as significant writers are all revisited here.

In those days all of our images of women writers struggling to find and maintain their voice were of white women. Simone de Beauvoir, Virginia Woolf, Tillie Olsen, Sylvia Plath, Adrienne Rich, these were the women whose lives offered us maps. Black women writers were not in the picture. When they entered the one woman whose legacy we most focused on was Zora Neale Hurston. Our attention was riveted by the tragic story of her achieving a measure of fame and recognition only to die alone, forgotten, and penniless. Feminist movement urging the recovery of lost stories brought Hurston and her writing back to the mainstream. Yet there remained a grave silence about her relational life. Even though there were murmurs that she had based her best book *Their Eyes Were Watching God* on the most important romance in her life, little effort was made to uncover biographical details.

Real-life romances between black female writers and black male partners seemed to hold no interest for the white women readers who were fascinated by the love life of Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre or Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes. Contemporary black women writers were notoriously silent about sex and love when speaking autobiographically about their relationships.

When their partnerships were talked about they were rarely if ever coupled with other writers, and if heterosexual were rarely with black male partners. Even though critics and fans alike rediscovered the work of the best-selling novelist of the 1940s, black woman writer Ann Petry, finding her alive and well living comfortably in the small Connecticut town of her upbringing continuing a lifelong romance with her husband George, interviewers did not highlight the beauty of their sustained partnership.

Given the extent to which racist/sexist representations depict black female/male relationships as always and only bitter or brutal permeate our cultural landscape in both written and visual imagery, the absence of alternative visions in both fictional and autobiographical narratives is alarming. Abundant portraits of black heterosexual bondings exist which highlight and even overemphasize the negative yet they offer little cultural understanding of the complexity of these connections. Clearly, we live in a culture wherein the political system of white supremacist capitalist patriarchy negates the significance of love between black women and men, actively creating a context where it is practically impossible for such love to be sustained. Counternarratives which offer diverse representations of the bonds of love between black women and men are needed as cultural documents.

Constantly faced with the paucity of nonbiased information about our lives as black women and men, it is both reassuring and affirming that we are witnessing a resurgence of interest in autobiographical narratives by