About bell hooks

bell hooks is a writer and cultural critic. Among her many books are the feminist classic *Ain't I A Woman*, the dialogue (with Cornel West) *Breaking Bread*, the children's books *Happy to Be Nappy* and *Be Boy Buzz*, the memoir *Bone Black* (Holt), and the general interest titles *All About Love, Rock My Soul*, and *Communion*. She has published six books with Routledge: *We Real Cool*, *Where We Stand*, *Outlaw Culture*, *Reel to Real*, *Teaching to Transgress*, and *Teaching Community*. Readers can look forward to her latest book in the teaching trilogy *Teaching Critical Thinking: Engaged Pedagogy*. Currently, she is Distinguished Professor in Residence in Appalachian Studies at Berea College in Kentucky.

Belonging:

A CULTURE OF PLACE

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1

Preface: To Know Where I'm Going

Talking about place, where we belong, is a constant subject for many of us. We want to know if it is possible to live on the earth peacefully. Is it possible to sustain life? Can we embrace an ethos of sustainability that is not solely about the appropriate care of the world's resources, but is also about the creation of meaning — the making of lives that we feel are worth living. Tracy Chapman sings lyrics that give expression to this yearning, repeating, "I wanna wake up and know where I'm going." Again and again as I travel around I am stunned by how many citizens in our nation feel lost, feel bereft of a sense of direction, feel as though they cannot see where our journeys lead, that they cannot know where they are going. Many folks feel no sense of place. What they know, what they have is a sense of crisis, of impending doom. Even the old, the elders, who have lived from decade to decade and beyond say life is different in this time "way strange" that our world today is a world of "too much" — that this too muchness creates a wilderness of spirit, the everyday anguish that shapes the habits of being for those who are lost, wandering, searching.

Mama's mama Baba (Sarah Oldham) would say a world of "too much wanting and too much waste." She lived a simple life, a life governed by seasons, spring for hoping and planting, summer for watching things grow, for walking and sitting on the porch, autumn for harvest and gathering, deep winter for stillness, a time for sewing and rest. All my childhood and into my first year of being grown up and living away from family, Baba lived secure in the two story wood frame house that was her sanctuary on this earth, her homeplace. She did not drive. No need to drive if you want your place on earth to be a world you can encompass walking. There were other folks like her in the world of my growing up, folks who preferred their feet walking solidly on the earth to being behind the wheel of an automobile. In childhood we were fascinated by the walkers, by the swinging arms and wide strides they made to swiftly move forward, covering miles in a day but always walking a known terrain, leaving, always coming back to the known reality, walking with one clear intent — the will to remain rooted to familiar ground and the certainty of knowing one's place.

Like many of my contemporaries I have yearned to find my place in this world, to have a sense of homecoming, a sense of being wedded to a place. Searching for a place to belong I make a list of what I will need to create firm ground. At the top of the list I write: "I need to live where I can walk. I need to be able to walk to work, to the store, to a place where I can sit and drink tea and fellowship. Walking, I will establish my presence, as one who is claiming the earth, creating a sense of belonging, a culture of place." I also made a list of places where I might like to dwell Seattle, San Francisco, Tucson, Charleston, Santa Fe (these were just a few of the places on my list). I travel to them in search of that feeling of belonging, that sense that I could make home here. Ironically, my home state of Kentucky was not on the list. And at the time it would never have occurred to me, not even remotely, to consider returning to my native place. Yet ultimately Kentucky is where my journey in search of place ends. And where these essays about place began.

Belonging: A Culture of Place chronicles my thinking about issues of place and belonging. Merging past and present, it charts a repetitive circular journey, one wherein I move around and around, from place to place, then end at the location I started from — my old Kentucky home. I find repetition scary. It seems to suggest a static stuck quality. It reminds of the slow languid hot summer days of childhood where the same patterns of life repeat over and over. There is much repetition in this work. It spans all my life. And it reminds me of how my elders tell me the same stories over and over again. Hearing the same story makes it impossible to forget. And so I tell my story here again and again and again. Facts, ideas repeat themselves as each essay was written as a separate piece — a distinct moment in time.

Many of these essays in this book focus on issues of land and land ownership. Reflecting on the fact that ninety percent of all black folk lived in the agrarian South before mass migration to northern cities in the early nineteen-hundreds, I write about black farmers, about black folks who have been committed both in the past and in the present to local food production, to growing organic and to finding solace in nature. Naturally it would be impossible to contemplate these issues without thinking of the politics of race and class. It would be impossible to write about Kentucky's past without bringing into the light the shadowy history of slavery in this state and the extent to which the politics of racial domination informs the lives of black Kentuckians in the present. Reflecting on the racism that continues to find expression in the world of real estate, I write about segregation in housing, about economic racialized zoning. And while these essays begin with Kentucky as the backdrop, they extend to politics of race and class in our nation as a whole.

Similarly the essays focusing on the environment, on issues of sustainability reach far beyond Kentucky. Highlighting ways the struggle to restore balance to the planet by changing our relationship to nature and to natural resources. I explore the connections between black self-recovery and ecology. Addressing the issue of mountain-top removal,

I write about the need to create a social ethical context wherein the concerns of Appalachians are deemed central to all American citizens. I write here about family, creating a textual album where I recall the folk who raised me, who nurtured my spirit.

Coming home, I contemplate issues of regionalism exploring my understanding of what it means to be a Kentucky writer. This collection of essays finds completion in my conversation with the visionary Kentucky writer, poet, essayist, and cultural critic Wendell Berry. Away from Kentucky I discovered Wendell's writings my first year in college. What excited me most about him was his definitive commitment to poetry (at that time poetry was the central focus of my own writing). Yet he explored a wide range of issues in his essays that were fundamentally radical and eclectic. Following in Wendell's footsteps was from the start a path that would lead me back to my native place, to Kentucky. The first class I taught at Berea College focused on Berry's discussion of the politics of race in *The Hidden Wound*. In our conversation we reflect on this work, on his life and my own, the ways our paths converge despite differences of age and race.

On the journey to Wendell's farm in Port Royal, Kentucky, I saw many beautiful barns storing recently harvested tobacco. These images were the catalyst for the short reflection on the tobacco plant included in this collection.

Naming traits that he sees as central to Kentucky in his work *Appalachian Values*, Loyal Jones emphasizes the importance of family commenting: "We think in terms of persons, we remember the people with whom we are familiar, and we have less interest in abstractions and people we have only heard about." Certainly many of the essays in *Belonging* begin with the family and kin with whom I am most familiar, especially in the essays focusing on creativity, aesthetic, and imaginative process. Writing about the past often places one at risk for evoking a nostalgia that simply looks back with longing and idealizes. Locating a space of genuineness, of integrity as I recall the past and endeavor to connect it to the ideals and yearnings of the present has

been crucial to my process. Using the past as raw material compelling me to think critically about my native place, about ecology and issues of sustainability, I return again and again to memories of family. During the writing of these essays Rosa Bell, my mother, began to lose memory, to move swiftly into a place of forgetfulness for which there is no return. Witnessing her profound and ongoing grief, about this loss, I learn again and again how precious it is to have memory.

We are born and have our being in a place of memory. We chart our lives by everything we remember from the mundane moment to the majestic. We know ourselves through the art and act of remembering. Memories offer us a world where there is no death, where we are sustained by rituals of regard and recollection. In *Belonging: A Culture of Place* I pay tribute to the past as a resource that can serve as a foundation for us to revision and renew our commitment to the present, to making a world where all people can live fully and well, where everyone can belong.

4

Touching the Earth

> I wish to live because life has within it that which is good, that which is beautiful, and that which is love. Therefore, since I have known all these things. I have found them to be reason enough and—I wish to live. Moreover, because this is so, I wish others to live for generations and generations and generations and generations.
>
> Lorraine Hansberry
> *To Be Young, Gifted, and Black*

When we love the earth, we are able to love ourselves more fully. I believe this. The ancestors taught me it was so. As a child I loved playing in dirt, in that rich Kentucky soil, that was a source of life. Before I understood anything about the pain and exploitation of the southern system of sharecropping, I understood that grown-up black folks loved the land. I could stand with my grandfather Daddy Jerry and look out at fields of growing vegetables, tomatoes, corn, collards, and know that this was his handiwork. I could see the look of pride on his face as I expressed wonder and awe at the magic of growing things. I knew that my grandmother Baba's backyard garden would yield beans, sweet potatoes, cabbage, and yellow squash, that

she too would walk with pride among the rows and rows of growing vegetables showing us what the earth will give when tended lovingly.

From the moment of their first meeting, Native American and African people shared with one another a respect for the life-giving forces of nature, of the earth. African settlers in Florida taught the Creek Nation run-aways, the "Seminoles,' methods for rice cultivation. Native peoples taught recently arrived black folks all about the many uses of corn. (The hotwater cornbread we grew up eating came to our black southern diet from the world of the Indian.) Sharing the reverence for the earth, black and red people helped one another remember that, despite the white man's ways, the land belonged to everyone. Listen to these words attributed to Chief Seattle in 1854:

> How can you buy or sell the sky, the warmth of the land? The idea is strange to us. If we do not own the freshness of the air and the sparkle of the water, how can you buy them? Every part of this earth is sacred to my people. Every shining pine needle, every sandy shore, every mist in the dark woods, every clearing and humming insect is holy in the memory and experience of my people ... We are part of the earth and it is part of us. The perfumed flowers are our sisters; the deer, the horse, the great eagle, these are our brothers. The rocky crests, the juices in the meadows, the body heat of the pony, and man — all belong to the same family.

The sense of union and harmony with nature expressed here is echoed in testimony by black people who found that even though life in the new world was "harsh, harsh,' in relationship to the earth one could be at peace. In the oral autobiography of granny midwife Onnie Lee Logan, who lived all her life in Alabama, she talks about the richness of farm life — growing vegetables, raising chickens, and smoking meat. She reports:

> We lived a happy, comfortable life to be right outa slavery times. I didn't know nothin else but the farm so it was happy and we was happy ... We couldn't do anything else but be happy. We accept the days as they come and as they were. Day by day until you couldn't say there was any great hard time. We overlooked it. We didn't think nothin about it. We just went along. We had what it takes to make a good livin and go about it.

Living in modern society, without a sense of history, it has been easy for folks to forget that black people were first and foremost a people of the land, farmers. It is easy for folks to forget that at the first part of the twentieth century, the vast majority of black folks in the United States lived in the agrarian south.

Living close to nature, black folks were able to cultivate a spirit of wonder and reverence for life. Growing food to sustain life and flowers to please the soul, they were able to make a connection with the earth that was ongoing and life-affirming. They were witnesses to beauty. In Wendell Berry's important discussion of the relationship between agriculture and human spiritual well-being, *The Unsettling of America*, he reminds us that working the land provides a location where folks can experience a sense of personal power and well-being:

> We are working well when we use ourselves as the fellow creature of the plants, animals, material, and other people we are working with. Such work is unifying, healing. It brings us home from pride and despair, and places us responsibly within the human estate. It defines us as we are: not too good to work without our bodies, but too good to work poorly or joylessly or selfishly or alone.

There has been little or no work done on the psychological impact of the "great migration' of black people from the agrarian south to the

industrialized north. Toni Morrison's novel, *The Bluest Eye,* attempts to fictively document the way moving from the agrarian south to the industrialized north wounded the psyches of black folk. Estranged from a natural world, where there was time for silence and contemplation, one of the "displaced' black folks in Morrison's novel, Miss Pauline, loses her capacity to experience the sensual world around her when she leaves southern soil to live in a northern city. The south is associated in her mind with a world of sensual beauty most deeply expressed in the world of nature. Indeed, when she falls in love for the first time she can name that experience only by evoking images from nature, from an agrarian world and near wilderness of natural splendor:

> When I first seed Cholly, I want you to know it was like all the bits of color from that time down home when all us chil'ren went berry picking after a funeral and I put some in the pocket of my Sunday dress, and they mashed up and stained my hips. My whole dress was messed with purple, and it never did wash out. Not the dress nor me. I could feel that purple deep inside me. And that lemonade Mama used to make when Pap came in out of the fields. It be cool and yellowish, with seeds floating near the bottom. And that streak of green them june bugs made on the tress that night we left from down home. All of them colors was in me. Just sitting there.

Certainly, it must have been a profound blow to the collective psyche of black people to find themselves struggling to make a living in the industrial north away from the land. Industrial capitalism was not simply changing the nature of black work life, it altered the communal practices that were so central to survival in the agrarian south. And it fundamentally altered black people's relationship to the body. It is the loss of any capacity to appreciate her body, despite its flaws, Miss Pauline suffers when she moves north.

The motivation for black folks to leave the south and move north was both material and psychological. Black folks wanted to be free of the overt racial harassment that was a constant in southern life and they wanted access to material goods — to a level of material well-being that was not available in the agrarian south where white folks limited access to the spheres of economic power. Of course, they found that life in the north had its own perverse hardships, that racism was just as virulent there, that it was much harder for black people to become landowners. Without the space to grow food, to commune with nature, or to mediate the starkness of poverty with the splendor of nature, black people experienced profound depression. Working in conditions where the body was regarded solely as a tool (as in slavery), a profound estrangement occurred between mind and body. The way the body was represented became more important than the body itself. It did not matter if the body was well, only that it appeared well.

Estrangement from nature and engagement in mind/body splits made it all the more possible for black people to internalize white-supremacist assumptions about black identity. Learning contempt for blackness, southerners transplanted in the north suffered both culture shock and soul loss. Contrasting the harshness of city life with an agrarian world, the poet Waring Cuney wrote this popular poem in the 1920s, testifying to lost connection:

She does not know her beauty
She thinks her brown body
has no glory.
If she could dance naked,
Under palm trees
And see her image in the river
She would know.
But there are no palm trees on the street,
And dishwater gives back no images.

For many years, and even now, generations of black folks who migrated north to escape life in the south, returned down home in search of a spiritual nourishment, a healing, that was fundamentally connected to reaffirming one's connection to nature, to a contemplative life where one could take time, sit on the porch, walk, fish, and catch lightning bugs. If we think of urban life as a location where black folks learned to accept a mind/body split that made it possible to abuse the body, we can better understand the growth of nihilism and despair in the black psyche. And we can know that when we talk about healing that psyche we must also speak about restoring our connection to the natural world.

Wherever black folks live we can restore our relationship to the natural world by taking the time to commune with nature, to appreciate the other creatures who share this planet with humans. Even in my small New York City apartment I can pause to listen to birds sing, find a tree and watch it. We can grow plants — herbs, flowers, vegetables. Those novels by African-American writers (women and men) that talk about black migration from the agrarian south to the industrialized north describe in detail the way folks created space to grow flowers and vegetables. Although I come from country people with serious green thumbs, I have always felt that I could not garden. In the past few years, I have found that I can do it — that many gardens will grow, that I feel connected to my ancestors when I can put a meal on the table of food I grew. I especially love to plant collard greens. They are hardy, and easy to grow.

In modern society, there is also a tendency to see no correlation between the struggle for collective black self-recovery and ecological movements that seek to restore balance to the planet by changing our relationship to nature and to natural resources. Unmindful of our history of living harmoniously on the land, many contemporary black folks see no value in supporting ecological movements, or see ecology and the struggle to end racism as competing concerns. Recalling the legacy of our ancestors who knew that the way we regard land and

nature will determine the level of our self-regard, black people must reclaim a spiritual legacy where we connect our well-being to the well-being of the earth. This is a necessary dimension of healing. As Berry reminds us:

> Only by restoring the broken connections can we be healed. Connection is health. And what our society does its best to disguise from us is how ordinary, how commonly attainable, health is. We lose our health — and create profitable diseases and dependencies — by failing to see the direct connections between living and eating, eating and working, working and loving. In gardening, for instance, one works with the body to feed the body. The work, if it is knowledgeable, makes for excellent food. And it makes one hungry. The work thus makes eating both nourishing and joyful, not consumptive, and keeps the eater from getting fat and weak. This health, wholeness, is a source of delight.

Collective black self-recovery takes place when we begin to renew our relationship to the earth, when we remember the way of our ancestors. When the earth is sacred to us, our bodies can also be sacred to us.

5

Reclamation and Reconciliation

Although I had been raised to think of myself as a southerner, it was not until I lived away from my native state of Kentucky that I begin to think about the geography of north and south. That thinking led me to consider the history of the African-American farmer in the United States. Coming from a long legacy of farmers, from rural America, when I left the state, I was initially consistently puzzled by the way in which black experience was named and talked about in colleges and university settings. It was always the experience of black people living in large urban cities who defined black identity. No one paid any attention to the lives of rural black folks. No matter that before the 1900s ninety percent of all black people lived in the agrarian South. In the depths of our psychohistory we have spent many years being agrarian, being at home on the earth, working the land. Cities are not our organic home. We are not an organically city people.

Even though the men and women in my family history farmed, living off the land, I was not raised to be a farmer or a farmer's wife.

My hands failed at quilting, at growing things. I could not do much with the needle or the plow. I would never follow aunts, uncles, nephews, and cousins into the tobacco fields. I would not work on the loosening floor. The hard, down and dirty work of harvesting tobacco would not determine my way of life. My destiny, the old folks constantly told me was different. They had seen it in dreams. In the stillness of the night they had spoken with god; the divine let them know my fate. While they could not tell me the nature of that fate, they were confident that it would be revealed. My elders encouraged me to accept all that was awaiting me, to claim it. Even if claiming it meant I had to leave my home, my native place. "Jesus," they would tell me, "had to turn away from mother and father and make his own way. And was it not also my destiny to follow in the path of Jesus."

Even though I left the land, left my old grandfathers sharecropping, plowing massa's field just as though plantation culture had never come to an end or sometimes plowing the plots of land, the small farms that were their very own to do with as they wanted, I was taught to see myself as a custodian of the land. Daddy Jerry taught me to cherish land. From him I learned to see nature, our natural environment as a force caring for the exploited and oppressed black folk living in the culture of white supremacy. Nature was there to teach the limitations of humankind, white and black. Nature was there to show us god, to give us the mystery and the promise. These were Daddy Jerry's lessons to me, as he lifted me onto a mule, as we walked the rows and rows of planted crops talking together.

It was sheer good fortune that I was allowed to walk hand in hand with strong black men who cared for me body and soul, men of the Kentucky backwoods, of the country. Men who would never think of hurting any living thing. These black men were gentle and full of hope. They were men who planted, who hunted, who harvested. They shared their bounty. As I take a critical look at what black males have collectively become in this nation, defeated and despairing, I recognize the psychic genocide that took place when black men were uprooted from their agrarian legacy to work in the industrialized North. Working the land, nurturing life, caring for crops and animals, had given black men of the past a place to dream and hope beyond race and racism, beyond oppressive and cruel white power. More often than not black females worked alongside farming black men, sometimes working in the fields (there was no money for hiring workers) but most times creating homeplace. In my grandmother's kitchen, soap was made, butter was churned, animals were skinned, crops were canned. Meat hung from the hooks in the dark pantry and potatoes were stored in baskets. Growing up, this dark place held the fruits of hard work and positive labor. It was the symbol of self-determination and survival.

There is so little written about these agrarian black folks and the culture of belonging they created. It is my destiny, my fate to remember them, to be one of the voices telling their story. We have forgotten the black farmer, both the farmer of the past, and those last remaining invisible farmers who still work the land. It has been in the interest of imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy to hide and erase their story. For they are the ancestors who gave to black folk from slavery on into reconstruction an oppositional consciousness, ways to think about life that could enable one to have positive self-esteem even in the midst of harsh and brutal circumstances. Their legacy of self-determination and hard work was a living challenge to the racist stereotype that claimed blacks were lazy and unwilling to work independently without white supervision.

Black male writer Ernest Gaines recalls the spirit of these agrarian visionaries in his novel, *A Gathering of Old Men,* as he also evokes the recognition that their legacy threatened those in power and as a consequence was marked for erasure. Remembering the folks who worked the land his character Johnny Paul exclaims: "...They are trying to get rid of all proof that black people ever farmed this land with plows and mules — like if they had nothing from the starten but motor machines.... Mama and Papa worked too hard in these same

fields. They mama and they papa worked too hard, too hard to have that tractor just come in that graveyard and destroy all proof that they ever was." Within imperialist white supremacist capitalist culture in the United States there has been a concentrated effort to bury the history of the black farmer. Yet somewhere in deeds recorded, in court records, in oral history, and in rare existing written studies is the powerful truth of our agrarian legacy as African-Americans. In that history is also the story of racist white folks engaged in acts of terrorism chasing black folk off the land, destroying our homeplace. That story of modern colonialism is now being told. Recent front page articles in the Lexington, Kentucky, newspaper, the *Herald-Leader,* highlighted the historical assaults on black landowners. In a section titled "Residue of A Racist Past" Elliot Jaspin's article, "Left Out of History Books," tells readers that "Beginning in 1864 and continuing for about 60 years whites across the United States conducted a series of racial expulsions, driving thousands of blacks from their homes to make communities lily-white." Black farmers, working their small farmers, were often a prime target for white folks who wanted more land.

In my family, land was lost during hard times. Farming was looked down upon by the black elites active in racial uplift who had no more respect for agriculture than their affluent white counterparts. Contempt for the poor black farmer had become widespread in the latter part of the nineteenth century as black people begin to desire affluence. W. E. B. DuBois' vision of the talented tenth did not include farmers. Despite his internalized racism Booker T. Washington was the black male leader who understood the importance of land ownership, of our agrarian roots. He understood that knowing how to live off the land was one way to be self-determining. While he was misguided in thinking that white paternalism was useful and benevolent, he remains one of the historical champions of the black farmer. He understood the value and importance of land ownership, of agriculture. The elite did not favor Washington's focus on vocational training. They did not value his work with Native Americans nor his lifelong concern for the

fate of poor black folk. In his autobiography, *Up from Slavery,* Washington urged black folks to choose self-reliance: "Go out and be a center, a life-giving center, as it were, to a whole community, when the opportunity comes, when you may give life where there is no life, hope where there is no hope, power where there is no power. Begin in a humble way, and work to build up institutions that will put black people on their feet." Agriculture was one arena where Washington saw black folks excelling. Working the land was one place where he could see black folks creating a culture of belonging.

In *Rebalancing the World* Carol Lee Flinders cites these characteristics of a culture of belonging — "intimate connection with the land to which one belongs,, empathetic relationship to animals, self-restraint, custodial conservatism, deliberateness, balance, clarity, honesty, generosity, egalitarianism, mutuality, affinity for alternative modes of knowing, playfulness, and openness to Spirit." These core values of belonging were not taught to me by teachers and professors. Certainly in graduate school and beyond it was the culture of enterprise that mattered, what we were taught would determine our success in life. At no point in my liberal arts education was farming ever mentioned. When I first went to college and named Kentucky as my native state, laughter was often the response. Stereotypes about Kentucky, about hillbillies and the like were the norm. No one talked about the Kentucky I knew most intimately. No one mentioned black farmers at Stanford University in my classes. Everywhere I journeyed the world of environmental activism was characterized by racial and class apartheid. In those locations no one ever assumed that black folks cared about land, about the fate of the earth.

Meanwhile in the small town Kentucky world of my upbringing the elders were dying and the young had no interest in farming, in land. The organic gardens, the animals raised both in the country on farms and in city limits that were a way of life for my grandparents were a legacy no one wanted to preserve. And the bounty their labor brought to our impoverished and needy world was soon forgotten.

Wherever I lived I made an effort to grow vegetables, even if just in pots, to garden as tribute to the elders and the agrarian traditions they held to be sacred and as a way to hold on to those traditions. Like my maternal and paternal grandparents, I wanted to be self-reliant, to live simply. My father's father had worked land in the country, sharecropping. From him I learned much about farming and rural life. My maternal grandparents lived in city limits as though they were living in the country. They all believed in the dignity of labor. They all taught that the earth was sacred.

No one talked about the earth as our mother. They did not divide the world into the neat dualistic gendered categories that are common strategies both in reformist feminist movement and in environmental activism. The earth, they taught me, like all of nature, could be life giving but it could also threaten and take life, hence the need for respect for the power of one's natural habitat. Both grandparents owned land. Like Booker T. Washington, they understood that black folks who had their "forty acres and a mule" or even just their one acre could sustain their lives by growing food, by creating shelter that was not mortgaged. Baba and Daddy Gus, my maternal grandparents, were radically opposed to any notion of social and racial uplift that meant black folks would lead us away from respect for the land, that would lead us to imitate the social mores of affluent whites. They understood the way white supremacy and its concomitant racial hierarchies led to the dehumanization of black life.

To them it was important to create one's own culture — a culture of belonging rooted in the earth. And in this way they shared a common belief system with that of anarchist poor white folks. Lots of poor Kentuckians black and white never embraced the renegade beliefs of the backwoods. But for those po' folks who did, they lived with a different set of values. And contrary to negative stereotypes those oppositional ways of thinking, those different values were more often than not life sustaining. In *Dreaming the Dark* feminist activist Starhawk shares this powerful insight: "When we really understand

that the earth is alive, and know ourselves as part of that life, we are called to live our lives with integrity, to make our actions match our beliefs, to take responsibility for creating what we would have manifest, to do the work of healing." These were the values taught to me by my agrarian ancestors. It is their wisdom that informs my efforts to call attention to the restorative nature of our relationship to nature. Collective healing for black folks in the diaspora can happen only as we remember in ways that move us to action our agrarian past.

Individual black folk who live in rural communities, who live on land, who are committed to living simply, must make our voices heard. Healing begins with self-determination in relation to the body that is the earth and the body that is our flesh. Most black people live in ways that threaten to shorten our life, eating fast foods, suffering from illnesses that could be prevented with proper nutrition and exercise. My ancestors were chain smokers, mostly rolling their own smokes from tobacco grown locally and many of them were hard drinkers on the weekends. Yet they ate right, worked hard, and exercised everyday. Most of them lived past seventy. We have yet to have movements for black self-determination that focus on our relation to nature and the role natural environments can play in resistance struggle. As the diverse histories of black farmers are uncovered, we will begin to document and learn. Many voices from the past tell us about agriculture and farming in autobiographical work that may on the surface offer no hint that there is documentation of our agrarian history contained within those pages. Anthropologist Carol Stack offers information about black farmers in *Call To Home: African Americans Reclaim the Rural South* explaining: "After the Civil War, beginning with no capital or equity of any kind, freedmen began working to assemble parcels of land. By 1920 more than 900,000 black Americans, all but a handful of them in the South, were classified as farm operators, representing about 20 percent of southern farmers... One-fourth of black farmers were true landowners, controlling a total of 15 million acres of farmland." Stack documents the way in which black folks struggled

and worked to own land, even if that land would simply a small farm, averaging, Stack reports "one-third the acreage of white farms."

Reading the autobiography of an African-American midwife in the deep South whose family lived off the land and were able to live well during hard times served as a catalyst compelling me to think and write about growing up in rural southern culture. Much of what we hear about that past is framed around discussion of racist exploitation and oppression. Little is written about the joy black folks experienced living in harmony with nature. In her new book, *We Are The Ones We Have Been Waiting For,* Alice Walker recalls: "I remember distinctly the joy I witnessed on the faces of my parents and grandparents as they savored the sweet odor of spring soil or the fresh liveliness of wind." It is because we remember the joy that we call each other to accountability in reclaiming that space of agency where we know we are more than our pain, where we experience our interdependency, our oneness with all life.

Alice Walker contends: "Looking about at the wreck and ruin of America, which all our forced, unpaid labor over five centuries was unable to avert, we cannot help wanting our people who have suffered so grievously and held the faith so long, to at last experience lives of freedom, lives of joy. And so those of us chosen by Life to blaze different trails than the ones forced on our ancestors have explored the known universe in search of that which brings the most peace, self-acceptance and liberation. We have found much to inspire us in Nature. In the sheer persistence and wonder of Creation itself." Reclaiming the inspiration and intention of our ancestors who acknowledged the sacredness of the earth, its power to stand as witness is vital to our contemporary survival. Again and again in slave narratives we read about black folks taking to the hills in search of freedom, moving into deep wilderness to share their sorrow with the natural habitat. We read about ways they found solace in wild things. It is no wonder that in childhood I was taught to recite scripture reminding me that nature could be an ally in all efforts to heal and renew the spirit. Listening to

the words of the psalmist exclaiming: "I will lift up mine eyes until the hills from whence cometh my help."

Seeking healing I have necessarily retuned to the Kentucky hills of my childhood, to familiar rural landscapes. It is impossible to live in the Kentucky of today and not feel sorrow about all that humans have done to decimate and destroy this land. And yet even as we grieve we must allow our sorrow to lead us into redemptive ecological activism. For me that takes myriad forms — most immediately acquiring land that will not be developed, renewing my commitment to living simply, to growing things. I cherish that bumper sticker that wisely reminds us "to live simply so that others may simply live." Now past the age of the fifty, I return to a Kentucky where my elderly parents live. I see the beautiful neighborhoods of my childhood, the carefully tended lawns, the amazing flower gardens making even the poorest shack a place of beauty, turned into genocidal war zones as drugs destroy the heart of the community. Addiction is not about relatedness. And so it takes us away from community, from the appropriate nurturing of mind, body, and spirit. To heal our collective spiritual body the very ground we live on must be reclaimed. Significantly in his essay, "The Body and the Earth," Wendell Berry shares this vital insight: "The body cannot be whole alone. Persons cannot be whole alone. It is wrong to think about bodily health as compatible with spiritual confusion, or cultural disorder, or with polluted air and water or an impoverished soil." Our visionary agrarian ancestors understood this.

Tragically the power of dominator cultural to dehumanize more often than not takes precedence over or collective will to humanize. Contemporary black folks who embrace victimhood as the defining ethos of their life surrender their agency. This surrender cannot be blamed on white folks. In more dire straits, slavery and the years thereafter, black folks found ways to nurture life sustaining values. They used their imagination. They created. We must remember that wisdom to resist falling into collective despair. We must, both individually and collectively, dare to critically examine our current

relationship to the earth, to nature, to ecosystems and to local and global environments.

When I examined my relationship to the rural world that I grew up in, it was clear to me that I needed to rekindle the custodial relationship to land that was a defining characteristic of my Kentucky kin. I grew up in a rural area where many black elders owned land. Some were rewarded by white employers for faithful service with the gift of an acre or two. That was often especially the case with individual black male sharecroppers who developed co-equal bonds with white bosses. Obviously, this was not the norm, but it is meaningful to register that folk can choose to move beyond the estrangement produced by exploitation and oppression to create bonds of community. Even though black farmers were more that fifty percent of the farming population as late as 1964, by 1982 farm ownership among black southerners declined. Stack offers this explanation: "As American agriculture consolidated and shook out the many poor people in its ranks, black farms went under at six times the rate of white farms. In county after county in every southern state, land that had been in black families for generations fell into the hands of white people." And more importantly white folks who acquired land cheap, especially land previously owned by black folks, were not willing to sell land to black folk even for high prices.

Years ago I came home to my native place to give a lecture. During the question and answer time I spoke about the white supremacy that is still pervasive when it comes to the issue of land ownership in Kentucky. Calling attention to the fact that white Kentuckians were often willing to sell land to white folks coming from other states rather than sell land to Kentucky black folks. In some cases black folks may have come from families who for generations worked white owned land, but when that land came up for sale their offers to buy were refused. Certainly the black Appalachian experience has always been contested by folks who either know little about Kentucky or refuse to accept the diversity of that history and the true stories of diversity in these hills.

Not far from where I live in Madison County, a black man who has lived there all his life pleads with white folks to purchase land for him, and he will pay them cash. Often those rare individual black folks who purchase farm land or land in the hills find themselves paying more than their white counterparts would pay. In the old days, after slavery and reconstruction, this was called the "race tax" — "you can get it but you gotta pay more." Your paying more reassures the racist white seller that white supremacy is still the order of the day for the white folks have shown they are smarter.

When I first purchased land in the Kentucky hills, I was first a silent partner with a white male friend. We did not know whether or not the owner of the property would have been prejudiced against black folks, but we chose not to openly disclose our partnership until all transactions were completed. Many of my white friends and acquaintances who own land in the Kentucky hills are gay yet their gayness is not initially visible, and shared whiteness makes it possible for them to move into areas that remain closed to black folk because of prejudice. Liberal and progressive white folks who think it "cool" to buy land next to neighbors that are openly racist rarely understand that by doing so they are acting in collusion with the perpetuation of white supremacy. I like to imagine a time when the progressive non-black folks who own hundreds and hundreds of acres will sell small lots to black people, to diverse groups of people so that we might all live in beloved communities which honor difference. M. Scott Peck introduced his book, *The Different Drum: Community Making and Peace*, with the powerful insight that: "In and through community is the salvation of the world." By definition, he tells us, community is inclusive.

Writing about the issue of race in *The Hidden Wound* published in 1968 and then again in the 1988 afterword, Wendell Berry reminds us that issues of freedom and prosperity cannot be separated from "the issue of the health of the land," that "the psychic wound of racism had resulted inevitably in wounds in the land, the country itself." My own deep wounds, the traumas of my Kentucky childhood are marked by

the meeting place of family dysfunction and the disorder produced by dominator thinking and practice, the combined effect of racism, sexism, and class elitism. When I left Kentucky I hoped to leave behind the pain of these wounds. That pain stayed with me until I began to do the work of wholeness, of moving from love into greater understanding of self and community. It is love that has led me to return home, to the Kentucky hills of my childhood where I felt the greatest sense of being one with nature, of being free. In those moments I always knew that I was more than my pain. Returning to Kentucky, doing my part to be accountable to my native place, enables me to keep a sublime hold on life.

Everyday I look out at Kentucky hills. They are a constant reminder of human limitations and human possibilities. Much hurt has been done to these Kentucky hills and yet they survive. Despite devastation, and the attempts by erring humans to destroy these hills, this earth, they will remain. They will witness our demise. There is divinity here, a holy spirit that promises reconciliation.