

Killing Rage: Militant Resistance bell hooks

I am writing this essay sitting beside an anonymous white male that I long to murder. We have just been involved in an incident on an airplane where K, my friend and traveling companion, has been called to the front of the plane and publicly attacked by white female stewardesses who accuse her of trying to occupy a seat in first class that is not assigned to her. Although she had been assigned the seat, she was not given the appropriate boarding pass. When she tries to explain they ignore her. They keep explaining to her in loud voices as though she is a child, as though she is a foreigner who does not speak airline English, that she must take another seat. They do not want to know that the airline has made a mistake. They want only to ensure that the white male who has the appropriate boarding card will have a seat in first class. Realizing our powerlessness to alter the moment we take our seats. K moves to coach. And I take my seat next to the anonymous white man who quickly apologizes to K as she moves her bag from the seat he has comfortably settled in. I stare him down with rage, tell him that I do not want to hear his liberal apologies, his repeated insistence that “it was not his fault.” I am shouting at him that it is not a question of blame, that the mistake was understandable, but the way K was treated was completely unacceptable, that it reflected both racism and sexism.

He let me know in no uncertain terms that he felt his apology was enough, that I should leave him be to sit back and enjoy his flight. In no uncertain terms I let him know that he had an opportunity to not be complicit with the racism and sexism that is so all pervasive in this society (that he knew no white man would have been called on the loudspeaker to come to the front of the plane while another white male took his seat—a fact that he never disputed). Yelling at him I said, “It was not a question of your giving up the seat, it was an occasion for you to intervene in the harassment of a black woman and you chose your own comfort and tried to deflect away from your complicity in that choice by offering an insincere, face-saving apology.”

From the moment K and I had hailed a cab on the New York City street that afternoon we were confronting racism. The cabbie wanted us to leave his taxi and take another; he did not want to drive to the airport. When I said that I would willingly leave but also report him, he agreed to take us. K suggested we just get another cab. We faced similar hostility when we stood in the first-class line at the airport. Ready with our coupon upgrades, we were greeted by two young white airline employees who continued their personal conversation and acted as though it were a great interruption to serve us. When I tried to explain that we had upgrade coupons, I was told by the white male that “he was not talking to me.” It was not clear why they were so hostile. When I suggested to K that I never see white males receiving such treatment in the first-class line, the white female insisted that “race” had nothing to do with it, that she was just trying to serve us as quickly as possible. I noted that as a line of white men stood behind us they were indeed eager to complete our transaction even if it meant showing no courtesy. Even when I requested to speak with a supervisor, shutting down that inner voice which urged me not to make a fuss, not to complain and possibly make life more difficult for the other black folks who would have to seek service from these two, the white attendants discussed together whether they would honor that request. Finally, the white male called a supervisor. He listened, apologized, stood quietly by as the white female gave us the appropriate service. When she handed me the tickets, I took a cursory look at them to see if all was in order. Everything seemed fine. Yet she looked at me with a gleam of hatred in her eye that startled, it was so intense. After we reached our gate, I shared with K that I should look at the tickets again because I kept seeing that gleam of hatred. Indeed, they had not been done properly.

I went back to the counter and asked a helpful black skycap to find the supervisor. Even though he was black, I did not suggest that we had been the victims of racial harassment. I asked him instead if he could think of any reason why these two young white folks were so hostile.

Though I have always been concerned about class elitism and hesitate to make complaints about individuals who work long hours at often unrewarding jobs that require them to serve the public, I felt our complaint was justified. It was a case of racial harassment. And I was compelled to complain because I feel that the vast majority of black folks who are subjected daily to forms of racial harassment have accepted this as one of the social conditions of our life in white supremacist patriarchy that we cannot change. This acceptance is a form of complicity. I left the counter feeling better, not feeling that I had possibly made it worse for the black folks who might come after me, but that maybe these young white folks would have to rethink their behavior if enough folks complained.

We were reminded of this incident when we boarded the plane and a black woman passenger arrived to take her seat in coach, only the white man sitting there refused to move. He did not have the correct boarding pass; she did. Yet he was not called to the front. No one compelled him to move as was done a few minutes later with my friend K. The very embarrassed black woman passenger kept repeating in a soft voice, “I am willing to sit anywhere.” She sat

elsewhere.

It was these sequences of racialized incidents involving black women that intensified my rage against the white man sitting next to me. I felt a “killing rage.” I wanted to stab him softly, to shoot him with the gun I wished I had in my purse. And as I watched his pain, I would say to him tenderly “racism hurts.” With no outlet, my rage turned to overwhelming grief and I began to weep, covering my face with my hands. All around me everyone acted as though they could not see me, as though I were invisible, with one exception. The white man seated next to me watched suspiciously whenever I reached for my purse. As though I were the black nightmare that haunted his dreams, he seemed to be waiting for me to strike, to be the fulfillment of his racist imagination. I leaned towards him with my legal pad and made sure he saw the title written in bold print: “Killing Rage.”

In the course on black women novelists that I have been teaching this semester at City University, we have focused again and again on the question of black rage. We began the semester reading Harriet Jacobs’s autobiography, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, asking ourselves “where is the rage?” In the graduate seminar I teach on Toni Morrison we pondered whether black folks and white folks can ever be subjects together if white people remain unable to hear black rage, if it is the sound of that rage which must always remain repressed, contained, trapped in the realm of the unspeakable. In Morrison’s first novel, *The Bluest Eye*, her narrator says of the dehumanized colonized little black girl Pecola that there would be hope for her if only she could express her rage, telling readers “anger is better, there is a presence in anger.” Perhaps then it is that “presence,” the assertion of subjectivity colonizers do not want to see, that surfaces when the colonized express rage.

In these times most folks associate black rage with the *underclass*, with desperate and despairing black youth who in their hopelessness feel no need to silence unwanted passions. Those of us black folks who have “made it” have for the most part become skilled at repressing our rage. We do what Ann Petry’s heroine tells us we must in that prophetic forties novel about black female rage *The Street*. It is Lutie Johnson who exposes the rage underneath the calm persona. She declares: “Everyday we are choking down that rage.” In the nineties it is not just white folks who let black folks know they do not want to hear our rage, it is also the voices of cautious upperclass black academic gatekeepers who assure us that our rage has no place. Even though black psychiatrists William Grier and Price Cobbs could write an entire book called *Black Rage*, they used their Freudian standpoint to convince readers that rage was merely a sign of powerlessness. They named it pathological, explained it away. They did not urge the larger culture to see black rage as something other than sickness, to see it as a potentially healthy, potentially healing response to oppression and exploitation.

In his most recent collection of essays, *Race Matters*, Cornel West includes the chapter “Malcolm X and Black Rage” where he makes rage synonymous with “great love for black people.” West acknowledges that Malcolm X “articulated black rage in a manner unprecedented in American history,” yet he does not link that rage to a passion for justice that may not emerge from the context of great love. By collapsing Malcolm’s rage and his love, West attempts to explain that rage away, to temper it. Overall, contemporary reassessments of Malcolm X’s political career tend to deflect away from “killing rage.” Yet it seems that Malcolm X’s passionate ethical commitment to justice served as the catalyst for his rage. That rage was not altered by shifts in his thinking about white folks, racial integration, etc. It is the clear defiant articulation of that rage that continues to set Malcolm X apart from contemporary black thinkers and leaders who feel that “rage” has no place in anti-racist struggle. These leaders are often more concerned about their dialogues with white folks. Their repression of rage (if and when they feel it) and their silencing of the rage of other black people are the sacrificial offering they make to gain the ear of white listeners. Indeed, black folks who do not feel rage at racial injustice because their own lives are comfortable may feel as fearful of black rage as their white counterparts. Today degrees and intensities of black rage seem to be overdetermined by the politics of location—by class privilege.

I grew up in the apartheid South. We learned when we were very little that black people could die from feeling rage and expressing it to the wrong white folks. We learned to choke down our rage. This process of repression was aided by the existence of our separate neighborhoods. In all black schools, churches, juke joints, etc., we granted ourselves the luxury of forgetfulness. Within the comfort of those black spaces we did not constantly think about white supremacy and its impact on our social status. We lived a large part of our lives not thinking about white folks. We lived in denial. And in living that way we were able to mute our rage. If black folks did strange, weird, or even brutally cruel acts now and then in our neighborhoods (cut someone to pieces over a card game, shoot somebody for looking at them the wrong way), we did not link this event to the myriad abuses and humiliations black folks suffered daily when we crossed the tracks and did what we had to do with and for whites to make a living. To express rage in that context was suicidal. Every black person knew it. Rage was reserved for life at home—for one another.

To perpetuate and maintain white supremacy, white folks have colonized black Americans, and a part of that

colonizing process has been teaching us to repress our rage, to never make them the targets of any anger we feel about racism. Most black people internalize this message well. And though many of us were taught that the repression of our rage was necessary to stay alive in the days before racial integration, we now know that one can be exiled forever from the promise of economic well-being if that rage is not permanently silenced. Lecturing on race and racism all around this country, I am always amazed when I hear white folks speak about their fear of black people, of being the victims of black violence. They may never have spoken to a black person, and certainly never been hurt by a black person, but they are convinced that their response to blackness must first and foremost be fear and dread. They too live in denial. They claim to fear that black people will hurt them even though there is no evidence which suggests that black people routinely hurt white people in this or any other culture. Despite the fact that many reported crimes are committed by black offenders, this does not happen so frequently as to suggest that all white people must fear any black person.

Now, black people are routinely assaulted and harassed by white people in white supremacist culture. This violence is condoned by the state. It is necessary for the maintenance of racial difference. Indeed, if black people have not learned our place as second-class citizens through educational institutions, we learn it by the daily assaults perpetuated by white offenders on our bodies and beings that we feel but rarely publicly protest or name. Though we do not live in the same fierce conditions of racial apartheid that only recently ceased being our collective social reality, most black folks believe that if they do not conform to white-determined standards of acceptable behavior they will not survive. We live in a society where we hear about white folks killing black people to express their rage. We can identify specific incidents throughout our history in this country whether it be Emmett Till, Bensonhurst, Howard Beach, etc. We can identify rare incidents where individual black folks have randomly responded to their fear of white assault by killing. White rage is acceptable, can be both expressed and condoned, but black rage has no place and everyone knows it.

When I first left the apartheid South, to attend a predominantly white institution of higher education, I was not in touch with my rage. I had been raised to dream only of racial uplift, of a day when white and black would live together as one. I had been raised to turn the other cheek. However, the fresh air of white liberalism encountered when I went to the West Coast to attend college in the early seventies invited me to let go some of the terror and mistrust of white people that living in apartheid had bred in me. That terror keeps all rage at bay. I remember my first feelings of political rage against racism. They surfaced within me after I had read Fanon, Memmi, Freire. They came as I was reading Malcolm X's autobiography. As Cornel West suggests in his essay, I felt that Malcolm X dared black folks to claim our emotional subjectivity and that we could do this only by claiming our rage.

Like all profound repression, my rage unleashed made me afraid. It forced me to turn my back on forgetfulness, called me out of my denial. It changed my relationship with home—with the South—made it so I could not return there. Inwardly, I felt as though I were a marked woman. A black person unashamed of her rage, using it as a catalyst to develop critical consciousness, to come to full decolonized self-actualization, had no real place in the existing social structure. I felt like an exile. Friends and professors wondered what had come over me. They shared their fear that this new militancy might consume me. When I journeyed home to see my family I felt estranged from them. They were suspicious of the new me. The “good” southern white folks who had always given me a helping hand began to worry that college was ruining me. I seemed alone in understanding that I was undergoing a process of radical politicization and self-recovery.

Confronting my rage, witnessing the way it moved me to grow and change, I understood intimately that it had the potential not only to destroy but also to construct. Then and now I understand rage to be a necessary aspect of resistance struggle. Rage can act as a catalyst inspiring courageous action. By demanding that black people repress and annihilate our rage to assimilate, to reap the benefits of material privilege in white supremacist capitalist patriarchal culture, white folks urge us to remain complicit with their efforts to colonize, oppress, and exploit. Those of us black people who have the opportunity to further our economic status willingly surrender our rage. Many of us have no rage. As individual black people increase their class power, live in comfort, with money mediating the viciousness of racist assault, we can come to see both the society and white people differently. We experience the world as infinitely less hostile to blackness than it actually is. This shift happens particularly as we buy into liberal individualism and see our individual fate as black people in no way linked to the collective fate. It is that link that sustains full awareness of the daily impact of racism on black people, particularly its hostile and brutal assaults.

Black people who sustain that link often find that as we “move on up” our rage intensifies. During that time of my life when racial apartheid forbid possibilities of intimacy and closeness with whites, I was most able to forget about the pain of racism. The intimacy I share with white people now seldom intervenes in the racism and is the cultural setting that provokes rage. Close to white folks, I am forced to witness firsthand their willful ignorance about the impact of race and racism. The harsh absolutism of their denial. Their refusal to acknowledge accountability for racist

conditions past and present. Those who doubt these perceptions can read a white male documenting their accuracy in Andrew Hacker's work *Two Nations: Black and White, Separate, Hostile, Unequal*. His work, like that of the many black scholars and thinkers whose ideas he draws upon, highlights the anti-black feelings white people cultivate and maintain in white supremacist capitalist patriarchy. Racial hatred is real. And it is humanizing to be able to resist it with militant rage.

Forgetfulness and denial enable masses of privileged black people to live the "good life" without ever coming to terms with black rage. Addictions of all sorts, cutting across class, enable black folks to forget, take the pain and rage away, replacing it with dangerous apathy and hard-heartedness. Addictions promote passive acceptance of victimization. In recent times conservative black thinkers have insisted that many black folks are wedded to a sense of victimization. That is only a partial truth. To tell the whole truth they would have to speak about the way mainstream white culture offers the mantle of victimization as a substitute for transformation of society. White folks promote black victimization, encourage passivity by rewarding those black folks who whine, grovel, beg, and obey. Perhaps this is what Toni Morrison's character Joe Trace is talking about when he shares in *Jazz* the knowledge his play-father Mr. Frank taught him, "the secret of kindness from white people—they had to pity a thing before they could like it." The presence of black victimization is welcomed. It comforts many whites precisely because it is the antithesis of activism. Internalization of victimization renders black folks powerless, unable to assert agency on our behalf. When we embrace victimization, we surrender our rage.

My rage intensifies because I am not a victim. It burns in my psyche with an intensity that creates clarity. It is a constructive healing rage. Vietnamese Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh teaches that self-recovery is ultimately about learning to see clearly. The political process of decolonization is also a way for us to learn to see clearly. It is the way to freedom for both colonized and colonizer. The mutuality of a subject-to-subject encounter between those individuals who have decolonized their minds makes it possible for black rage to be heard, to be used constructively.

Currently, we are daily bombarded with mass media images of black rage, usually personified by angry young black males wreaking havoc upon the "innocent," that teach everyone in the culture to see this rage as useless, without meaning, destructive. This one-dimensional misrepresentation of the power of rage helps maintain the status quo. Censoring militant response to race and racism, it ensures that there will be no revolutionary effort to gather that rage and use it for constructive social change. Significantly, contemporary reinterpretations and critiques of Malcolm X seek to redefine him in a manner that strips him of rage as though this were his greatest flaw. Yet his "rage" for justice clearly pushed him towards greater and greater awareness. It pushed him to change. He is an example of how we can use rage to empower. It is tragic to see his image recouped to condone mindless anger and violence in black life.

As long as black rage continues to be represented as always and only evil and destructive, we lack a vision of militancy that is necessary for transformative revolutionary action. I did not kill the white man on the plane even though I remain awed by the intensity of that desire. I did listen to my rage, allow it to motivate me to take pen in hand and write in the heat of that moment. At the end of the day, as I considered why it had been so full of racial incidents, of racist harassment, I thought that they served as harsh reminders compelling me to take a stand, speak out, choose whether I will be complicit or resist. All our silences in the face of racist assault are acts of complicity. What does our rage at injustice mean if it can be silenced, erased by individual material comfort? If aware black folks gladly trade in their critical political consciousness for opportunistic personal advancement then there is no place for rage and no hope that we can ever live to see the end of white supremacy.

Rage can be consuming. It must be tempered by an engagement with a full range of emotional responses to black struggle for self-determination. In mid-life, I see in myself that same rage at injustice which surfaced in me more than twenty years ago as I read the *Autobiography of Malcolm X* and experienced the world around me anew. Many of my peers seem to feel no rage or believe it has no place. They see themselves as estranged from angry black youth. Sharing rage connects those of us who are older and more experienced with younger black and non-black folks who are seeking ways to be self-actualized, self-determined, who are eager to participate in anti-racist struggle. Renewed, organized black liberation struggle cannot happen if we remain unable to tap collective black rage. Progressive black activists must show how we take that rage and move it beyond fruitless scapegoating of any group, linking it instead to a passion for freedom and justice that illuminates, heals, and makes redemptive struggle possible.