Dear NWSA Community,

The National Women’s Studies Association mourns the passing of Dr. Gloria Jean Watkins, Ph.D./ bell hooks - genius, scholar, cultural critic, author, professor, truth speaker, a lover of words and of us. She challenged us, taught us, spoke to and sometimes for us. She gave us the words to say and the courage to say them. bell hooks never gave up. She never gave in. She was more than we could have asked for and gave us more than we could have ever imagined. As someone said, our heroes are dying, and our enemies are in power.

When I first heard, read, finally accepted, and understood that bell hooks was gone all I could do was sit down and catch my breath. It is sometimes hard to imagine being in a world where the geniuses of your time are no longer in it. I started thinking about how I could honor her and mark this moment. Years ago, when I lived in Nairobi, my host mother told me that when someone in their family dies, everyone comes together to say that person’s name over and over again. She said that you can shout it. You can whisper it. You can cry or moan or shake while adding your voice to the collective of love. I had so many questions, but my host mother told me that it would not make any sense until I was there to witness and experience it for myself. When her cousin died, we traveled outside the city to the village for the funeral. After a long, more formal program at the church, we arrived at the gravesite, and it finally started. Her aunt went first, and voice after voice joined in: some were moaning, some were crying, some were angry that she had left them. It just went on and on, and by the end, I was exhausted and spent, but I felt whole. It was cathartic. It was healing. It was a moment to recognize her life and contributions and give voice to it. My Nana, when I shared this with her, said that when people die, they run on ahead to see how the end is going to be, and maybe when we say their name, it marks the moment that their journey begins, or perhaps it marks the moment that this journey has ended.

I think about that whenever someone I know, or I know about, passes away. I said my Nana’s name, my nephew’s name, and my grandfather’s name. I have said my mother-in-law and my father-in-law’s name. I said Breonna’s name, Tamir’s name, and Trayvon’s name. I said Maya Angelou’s name, and Toni Morrison and Audre Lorde and Toni Cade Bambara. I said their names over and over again; sometimes, I spoke their names into the wind; sometimes, I said it as I wrote it down. I did it to remember them, to mark the moment, and add my voice to the collective of love. bell hooks, our shero, has run on ahead to
see how the end is going to be and when I finally accepted it, I stopped and did what was most cathartic and healing for me: I simply said her name.

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On December 15, we lost a giant. A genius. A fire. A brilliant incandescent spirit. For those of us who knew her or knew her work, we lost our radical intellectual spirit guide who helped us to find our way. I am not ok. Black women are not ok. None of us—feminists, scholars, activists, truth seekers, survivors—who sat at the feet of her work are ok. Not today. Not at this moment and not for a minute. It is not enough to say she saved me from cutting off my tongue because unless you know her genius, you will think that this is just about violence and not about salvation. It is not enough to say that she saved me from burning it all down because unless you know her brilliance, you will never understand how her words taught me how to come through the fire and be better and stronger on the other side. Because she wrote and published extensively, “bell hooks” will never leave us, but Gloria Jean Watkins did. The sun is not shining as bright as it was when she was still with us.

We speak her name.
We tell our stories.
We lift her up.
We do this to remember.
We do this to mark the moment.
We do this to thank her for loving us, for teaching us, and for reminding us.

As NWSA marks this moment, I reached out and asked some of our former presidents to join with me and share their reflections and stories to add their voices to our collective of love. It is mourning in America but like our sista bell hooks taught us, we will get through this and come out stronger on the other side.

In solidarity,
The National Women’s Studies Association (NWSA)
Karsonya “Kaye” Wise Whitehead, President, 2020-2022

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When I first read Ain't I A Woman as an undergraduate in the 1980s, it had a profound influence on me. bell hooks was a trailblazing feminist theorist who unflinchingly troubled conventional feminist wisdom and wrote with passion, love, rage, and brilliant insight. When I met Gloria on several occasions after that, I was touched by her warmth and her embrace of people around her. She is a legend who will be sorely missed.
-Premilla Nadasen, 2018-2020

I first met bell hooks on the page as an undergraduate in Montreal in the 1980s. The craft of her writing, and the urgency with which she shared insights from her lived experiences as a young, southern Black
feminist, sparked a new relationship to the world around me, as her work has done (and will continue to do) for so many. hooks' first-person theorizing and vision of the world's possibilities (and its problems) continues to inform my own vision of what's possible, collectively, and individually, in our pursuit of coalitional justice, love, and community.

-Vivian M. May, 2014-2016

It was not until NWSA 2014 in Puerto Rico that I, then President of NWSA, had a chance to meet in person the incredible big heart and gorgeous soul behind the bell hooks that had already profoundly impacted my thinking, pedagogical practice, and activist scholarly trajectories. That impact, in the present perfect, continues on. As we mourn bell’s passing today, I take solace in Luisah Teish’s words: “What is remembered lives.” bell lives and lives on. She leaves this beloved world of hers a vast body of work wrapped in a vision so beautiful and packed with recipes and strategies for a beloved community so rich that we can do nothing but move forward with this feminist liberation work.

-Yi-Chun Tricia Lin 林怡君, 2012-2014

My memory of bell hooks is of being with her in one of those awesome, formative gatherings of Black feminist scholars Beverly held at Spelman. Being in bell’s presence was a delightful, stimulating, challenging, brain-expanding experience; she was fun, iconoclastic unflinchingly frank yet kind and you always came away with new ways to see and address long-standing problems.

-Bonnie Thornton Dill, 2010-2012

I met Gloria/bell for the first time in 1981 at the now legendary NWSA conference in Storrs, Connecticut. She was sharing her first book with all of us...ALN'T I A WOMAN. We heard Audre Lorde speak and were mesmerized. I shared my dorm room with Gloria, and we talked all night. We’ve been talking for forty years, including at other NWSA conferences. When she spoke in Puerto Rico, I remembered our deep friendship over so many years and shed tears quietly when she recalled our first meeting in Storrs. I will miss her forever and am thankful for her forever commitment to radical feminism.

-Beverly Guy Sheftall, 2008-2010

The first time I met bell hooks was in a hotel service elevator in New Haven. We were there for a conference organized by the women of color caucus of Yale Law School. When the elevator door closed, she turned to me and said, “Hi, I am Gloria Watkins!” By the time my lame brain made the connection between Gloria Watkins and bell hooks, the elevator had reached the lobby floor and she exited before I was able to say how much I admired her work. Fortunately, I was able to reconnect with her and we shared a table over lunch. I can’t remember what we talked about but obviously I felt comfortable enough to sit next to her at the opening plenary. (I was/am a shy person and don’t usually adhere myself to my idols.) The keynote speaker for opening night was Catherine MacKinnon. I can’t remember every word she said except that she asserted that women of color could not theorize. We couldn’t believe our ears. bell hooks stayed very still, but I could feel her anger. At the Q&A, MacKinnon once again showed her true self by responding to an Asian American law student with condescension. That was the last straw. bell hooks turned to me and said, “I need to go back to my room to rewrite my keynote.” She was out of sight the next day until it was her turn to speak in the evening.

As she spoke, the pall that hung over the conference began to lift. In her soft-spoken way, she detailed how she based her theories on her lived experience—MacKinnon had considered this a flaw and a basis
for the assertion she made in her own talk. Everything was whole again. I don’t have the privilege to call bell hooks my friend, but I will never forget our first encounter.

-Vivien Ng, 1993-1994

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