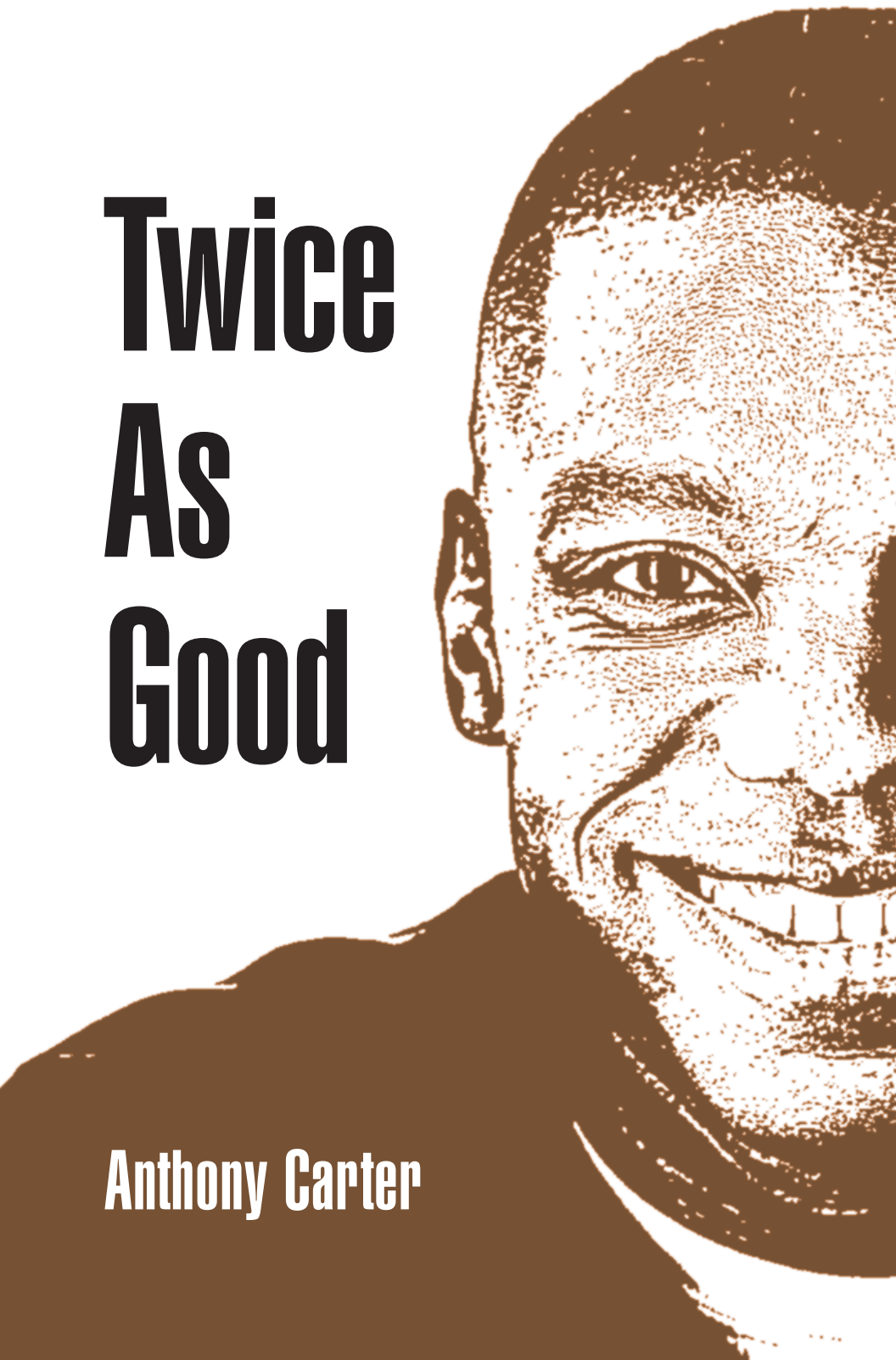


Twice As Good

Anthony Carter



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She Real Cool: My Long Overdue Love Letter to bell hooks

Twenty five years ago this Fall, I had a spiritual breakthrough. Twenty five years ago, I left another doomed from the start relationship. My second one in less than a year.

What made this one different is that two wonderful women entered and changed my life (Vievee Francis who had been a friend for four years and bell hooks — an incredible thinker and writer). At 24, my whole life had fallen apart.

Although this would be one of many upsets, I now had tools to deal with the world's craziness and the new revolutionary concept that I could influence my world.

When I was brought to *Black Looks* and then *Breaking Bread* followed by *Where We Stand, We Real Cool* and *The Will to Change*, it was clear to me that my life would never be the same. All of the writings and thinking entailed in these wonderful critical texts answered so many of the questions that I'd spent a lifetime creating.

Reading *Black Looks — Race and Representation* shed light on how pop culture pimps and fucks blacks and gays. It let me know that all the uneasiness I'd felt about what was possible was a clear signal.

Black Looks provided me with insight concerning why I had always dug Madonna and there might be something deeply troubling about her influence. It made me examine the need by the gay community to worship and fawn over white femininity. It also allowed me to reexamine why certain images entertained and left me spellbound.

Reading *Breaking Bread*, I found evidence that domination of another human being was stupid, pointless, harmful and unnecessary. Seeing someone have the same thoughts and then share them with the world was refreshing and awe inspiring.

All my life, domination and coercion were heralded as the only and true way to be in the world. That being able to cut a bitch, make someone feel bad and highlight their flaws and perceived shortcomings was the only way to make it in this world and my family of origin.

Many times, my sadness would alarm and scare people. As a re-

sult, the attacks and belittling would commence.

Breaking Bread (the wonderful work she coauthored with Cornel West) was my personal bible for many years. Watching two brilliant black minds dance, seduce, uplift and enlighten was a magical miracle.

Black folks rarely talk with one another, though we do spend an incredible amount of time talking at and to. Witnessing this exchange regarding their friendship and the nurturing they gave it for more than two decades was a marvelous vision.

She provided and continues to provide ongoing support as to what people can do to love and reach one another.

In our dominator culture, we are schooled in ways of interaction that promote constant one upmanship.

Where We Stand must be mentioned when I bring up texts that shook me to the core and changed how I saw myself and the world around me. Until I got my mitts on this collection, I never understood or addressed class or class differences. Although I was and continue to be drawn to working class and raised poor men, it was never clear why, nor why there was so much angst and upset around money.

While reading *Where We Stand*, I was involved with a great man who was seriously driven by and highly influenced by his class origins. While I continuously sought reasons to combine our differences in an effort to create what I constantly referred to as a “third way” (our way of dealing with challenges and life) he resisted anything that threatened his allegiance to his class upbringing.

In many ways we were communicating in ways that were foreign to one another. There was no amount of discussion, tears or therapy that could address and dismantle my class bias nor his class allegiance without addressing the source of the conflict — class differences.

When anyone asks how I’ve moved out of survival mode and into thriving mode, I inevitably return to books, the written word and, most undeniably, bell hooks.

Although a focus on black mental health pervades each of her books, *We Real Cool* truly is a winner. As a black man who is constantly told how uncool he is, it was a revelation to read someone else’s account of what a cool black dude says, does and is. She pulled no punches and let all readers know what cool is and is not and of course the costs for committing to the “cool” way of being.

She consistently offers incredible versions of masculinity and how we can all learn to accept it. We are also told that there is always a better relationship with anyone other than the human being sitting in front of you at the moment. Hooks teaches via life choices that there is no better place than right here right now and with whomever she has chosen to engage with at the moment.

Even though it is important to love and engage with others she reminds us through her writings that to engage fully one must continuously and deliberately disengage and spend time in solitude.

What makes this so revolutionary is that as a black female in this culture, she is expected to gain her self identity via always being available to anyone who may need something. To be black or any person of color in this culture is to have the expectation of servitude placed on your back from birth.

Being a woman who thinks and writes and loves is a gigantic responsibility in a culture that has no time for thinking or writing or god forbid loving rightly. To be a man in this country who openly defies domination is to make oneself a target and thereby invite all sorts of misunderstanding and societal upset. To be a man or woman schooled in the art of patriarchy is also to be firmly entrenched in the understanding that many men in this country are not well loved.

During a recent class of young people, I had them read and respond to an excerpt in bell hooks’ *The Will to Change*. Many of my young charges refused to grapple with the fact that people wanting and craving love was not unusual.

My charges could not understand anyone’s longing to become emotionally healthy or the yearning for love and connection. They were uneasy writing about love and its absolute power to change and transform. Some young people shared that loving sets us up for all kinds of disappointments in life.

We march about war, stolen elections and psychopaths running our country and yet no public outcry for love is staged or allowed. Writing about it feels wrong and misguided. Yet this is the work that must be done.

One of the things that bell also made sure of is that black men are not meant to be invisible. She has pointed out on more than one occasion that men are not allowed to be full human beings and this is what causes us severe mental health. She also makes sure that in her work

everyone is given the opportunity to see how men and in particular black men are treated and seen.

When I began to read her work, my life changed and I began to question what the world said I should have or be.

Oh My God! He's Wearing a G-String?! My Parents and Prince

At the beginning of the eighties, a new force of nature entered my home during a party for my dad, his friends and his soon to be second wife. Prince Rogers Nelson was in my home dancing in thigh high boots, an open and freely flapping trench coat and yes, horror of horrors, a g-string.

My parents and their friends were horrified. Was this a man? A transvestite? Was he black? Mixed? On drugs? God forbid was this creature (lean in for the whisper) gay?

All I knew was that he seemed to be enjoying himself: he let other people wrestle with labeling him and he upset my parents. As a 13 year old, I was hooked. I rarely saw my parents get riled up about anything. Prince got them riled up.

Prince gave me a new definition of black male artistry and masculinity. If a black man could be this flamboyant and talented then anything was possible.

As a young black kid struggling with identity, oppression and on-going homophobic assaults, seeing a black male take up space and offer the world the “finger” was needed and welcomed. Prince let me know that it was ok to be talented and different.

I would need this assurance. Just around the corner was disease and stigma that would wipe out difference, creativity, passion and talent. Prince let the world know that through a great hook any subject could be spoken of: sex, nuclear war, AIDS, love, obsession, joy.

It is not often that someone this gifted is granted the opportunity to influence the world and pop culture for thirty years. I can vividly recall what I was going through when I listen to his catalogue.

Dirty Mind — an eight grader curious and frightened by the world and determined to seek it out anyway. *Purple Rain* — I remember my best friend singing Darling Nikki during one of our summer outings and I thought “wow”. “Somebody is talking about masturbation on a record?” I also remember running to my record player and turning it down when he got to that line.

Purple Rain, the movie, caused major pandemonium when it was

released. Many of my friends bragged about having seen it 10, 15 and in some truly bizarre cases, 25 times. My parents constantly griped about why we needed to see the movie so many times and play his records repeatedly.

That is until they heard a couple of B-sides, namely *How Come You Don't Call Me Anymore* and *She's Always in My Hair*. Once they got a load of those ditties, they quit asking why we were so unremittingly under his spell.

In my obsessiveness, nothing the purple one did seemed wrong or a misstep. What I believed scared and enthralled so many people (regarding his genius) was the ability to not “give a fuck”.

Black male musicians were limited to certain forms of expression. R&B male singers were expected to be smooth, calm, sexy and not too intimidating. They were expected to be boring and predictable.

As an artist who wrote, produced and recorded his own music, Prince provided no predictability. Having mastered some 40+ instruments, Prince genre hopped in ways that no artist has done before or since.

Whether jamming with Chaka Khan until the wee hours of the morning, performing with Miles Davis and Q-Tip from Tribe Called Quest or simply sitting on a stool with a guitar playing an acoustic medley of his and other artists' hits, here was a man that owned his life and determined what it would look like.

As a black male living in this country, musically roaming was another large “no-no” that he ripped through with abandon.

Whether discussing drug addiction, government apathy or violence among our inner city youth, Prince shared with us where we were heading if we didn't make changes.

I urge all artists to step up and be 1/10 the artist he was. Can you imagine a conversation between Prince and James Baldwin? While he wasn't for my parents generation, he maintained a relevance and level of productivity that younger generations should wisely adopt.

My parents generation were a group of folks overly concerned with what people thought and most importantly what they said. My parents were always frightened of any person who brought too much attention to themselves. Prince teased us with world straddling and caused the older generations much grief.

In my eyes, he was a hero. Black men were not allowed to rock

high heels, be uber talented and not give a shit about what people thought or said about them.

We need black males secure in their manhood who give themselves over to their gifts then self create a sustaining vision of themselves and also rock high heels.

Where are artists and men like Prince Rogers Nelson? Where are the gutsy, ballsy not giving a fuck artists? If I see one more nitwit talking about being an artist and then crank out the same shit as everybody else, I will lose it.

As a young closeted queen, I had no black male role models who were as fearless as the Purple One. I've known black males who either got crushed by White Supremacy (my grandfather) or never got a handle on their genius (my uncle) which means he never fully realized it.

Prince became a symbol of black male genius in its glory — unapologetic, relentless and unrestrained. Thank God I was introduced to this wonderful bellwether. I would have never survived high school without his talent and music.

I want the genius with me and I want to believe that this human was more Christ like than any of us will ever know. When he started rocking the brutally honest and historically troubling word SLAVE across his cheek, I was not yet committed to a life of creativity and the mind.

My naivete allowed me to think that since he was rich and famous and putting out his own music that there weren't people attempting to control him. As I began producing work and releasing it to the world, his insistence on being free made sense.

Since we now live in a world that encourages us to not take a stand about anything, a man who stood for something was a welcome and invigorating entity.

7 Reasons Prince Will Always Rock and Rule

In the two months since his death, Prince has become more popular than ever. I have loved and admired this man and his talent for 30 years. While people worldwide mourn his passing and scramble to find a suitable replacement (impossible), my focus is on honoring the legacy of his music and the bravery and courage he possessed.

In a world that requires your soul in exchange for any bit of recognition or attention, Prince showed us how to get and maintain attention based solely on talent and a dedication to craft. No artist could combine sexuality, redemption, social commentary and religion like this man. Here are seven reasons Prince will always Rock and Rule.

1. In *Controversy* he forces us to play with identity and the fluidity of how one can change, straddle worlds and do it with no self-consciousness and to a good beat. Am I black or white; am I straight or gay? Do I believe in God, do I believe in me? Some people want to die so they can be free; People call me rude; I wish we all were nude; I wish there were no black and white; I wish there were no rules.

2. *Ronnie, Talk to Russia* is an eighties plea to eliminate nuclear weapons before we destroy the planet and one another. Ronnie, Talk to Russia — “Don’t you blow up my world”.

3. *Purple Rain* — the movie, song and album — confronts us with an artist struggling with both self actualization and offering a paramour care with the lyrics — I never wanted to see you cry; I only want to see you dancing in the Purple Rain.

4. On the brilliant and way ahead of its time *Around the World in a Day*, Prince serves us Middle Eastern influences while urging us in the title track: “Open your heart, open your mind a train is leaving all day. A wonderful trip through our time and laughter is all you pay”.

The entire album is wonderful romp through, sex, forgiveness, redemption and social uplift. *Pop Life* quickly and disturbingly reminds us that “everybody wants a thrill”. In *America*, he states: “Little sister making minimum wage living in a one-room jungle-monkey cage. Can’t get over; she’s almost dead. She may not be in the black but she’s happy she ain’t in the red”.

5. *Parade* returned Prince to our movie theaters with two very different and equally sensual songs. *Kiss* brought us funk and longing with a determination to give in to a full relationship complete with surrender and a nod to building relationships beyond superficiality: “you don’t have to be rich to rule my world you don’t have to be cool to be my girl.”

Sometimes it Snows in April (my personal favorite) is so haunting that it breaks my heart no matter how many times I hear it. A simple arrangement with absolutely stunning vocals, this track reminds us that things in life don’t always go our way and the mystery and joy of life is found in places that leave us raw, vulnerable and transformed.

6. *Sign of the Times* is his absolute best. Perfection. Each track on this double slice of heaven was pure magic. Did I mention that like Stevie Wonder’s *Songs in the Key of Life* it was a double album. There is no way you can listen to this double disc and not hear the prophetic call that would be the 80s and beyond.

Released in 1987 with an accompanying concert video, it begins with the title track “In France a skinny man died of a big disease with a little name”. As if this was not enough in the same song he points out that our government can send people to the moon but we can’t figure out how to have enough for everyone to eat.

He adds a wink to lust and the chance at monogamy when he tells a paramour in *I Could Never Take the Place of Your Man* that he may be qualified for a one night affair but he could never take the place of her man. What about his usual blend of sensuality, sexuality and religion in *Adore*? “If God struck me blind your beauty I’d still see”.

7. “He believed young people could change the world” said Van Jones the co-founder of the YesWeCode initiative (an organization dedicated to ensuring that 100,000 low income youth learn to write code). Prince supported this initiative to create a generation of self sufficient youth ready to lead in the 21st century.

Why We Need Lauryn Hill More Than Ever

Ten years ago, I received a call with an offer to work with Lauryn Hill. As a result of my obsession with this talented young woman, I couldn't agree to the gig fast enough. In my excitement, I called my sister (a fellow groupie), my cousin and anyone else I could dial up.

While I spent most of the night preparing for the next day's life changing opportunities, I was not prepared for meeting the artist in person. She seemed broken.

I saw such misery and pain that my desire for fame and the end of obscurity ended. I wanted to hug her and ask "how you be?"

What I witnessed was an artist who had been pushed beyond their limits and was in need of rest and contemplation. My perception was that she had been pulled in so many directions for so long that she was now unable to belong to herself.

Was I another fan demanding a performance and happily willing to forego the need that she and we all have to safeguard our talent in ways that allow us to resist the unforgiving pimp that is fame and fortune? Was it more important that I pitch my ideas and a way for us to collaborate than offer a soulful connection.

What I had no way of knowing at the time was the dramatic shift that pop culture was gearing up to serve the masses. At a very pivotal time, pop culture was at a point wherein something new was being craved and yet there was a hunkering for predictability.

Lauryn Hill existed at that very pivotal place of "between".

Culture critics, academics and community elders love to highlight the problems that occur when we allow musicians and celebrities to rear and influence our children. Few will confess to being influenced by the culture at large and in turn influencing the same culture. We are all products and creators of our shared cultural experiences.

What Ms. Hill represented in her 1998-2004 heyday was the possibility of success that was based in loving blackness, loving and embracing womanhood and allowing your talent to determine how far you could rise.

Loving blackness in this culture is a problem and can get you much

side eyeing and baffled looks. I said "loving blackness", not apping, obsessing over or constantly acculturating it.

Her dark skin and full natural hair could have allowed the larger white establishment and pop culture to dismiss her and keep her a small and powerful underground entity. This ain't what happened. She wore her blackness proudly.

I saw her on the cover of major fashion magazines sans lightening and all of the other bullshit black folks feel we must consent to if pop culture success is our ultimate goal. Videos filled with this rich dark skin blasted the air waves and our eyes. Her love of blackness and respect for black artists who proceeded her was clear.

Unlike many young artists, there was no ridiculous claim to originality and the outrageous claim that she had invented a new and un-realized or unheard of musical art form.

Her music gave young girls something to aspire to and young men a vision of a woman whose primary concern was not the male gaze. She never denied nor exploited her sexuality.

In the past fifteen years post her solo debut, much has changed and remained the same in regard to black folks, women, music and popular culture. When my little sister went from talking with much pride about this young woman who had accomplished so much so early in her life to explaining the significance and media sensation that was Paris Hilton, I knew the end was near.

There is no guarantee that Ms. Hill would be interested in re-mounting her throne or that anyone would be interested if she did. There is a need for young women to see other young women "belong to themselves" and not gleefully trotting towards anything that will offer them celebrity.

Our new world order is full of blond weaves, trash talking and a depth of soul violation that is sickening and almost humorous. I never worried or winced when my baby sister listened to Lauryn Hill. I worry when the only thing a black woman can do or take pride in is being the "baddest bitch".

Be like Lauryn and bell hooks: develop a real taste for rebellion, be clear in communication and love yourself fully and maybe we won't need Ms. Hill because her job and mission is complete.

My Obsession with Stevie Wonder Will Never Go Away

When I spent way too much time dating assholes in the 90s, I came across a great quote that changed who and why I dated. bell hooks spoke of making love while listening to the genius that is Stevie Wonder.

As a kid, I didn't recognize his brilliance. In the last forty years, we have yet to produce an artist as gifted, socially relevant and vulnerable as Stevie Wonder. Most artists have refused to trot the path of love, spiritual renewal and commitment to full and unabashed, humanity enhancing artistic expression.

While artists and anyone raised in this culture gets seduced into worshipping money and doing any and everything to get it, Talking Book and the subsequent *Songs in the Key of Life* were not cheap, produced for mass consumption albums.

Everything you could ever want to know about love, politics and human possibility can be found when listening to *Talking Book*, *Songs in the Key of Life* and *Innervisions*. Politics come into play when he speaks of going to Saturn and living amongst people who not only don't take more than they need but also put back things they don't need (*Songs In the Key of Life*).

bell hooks often states that to love blackness in this culture is dangerous and upsets the masses. Stevie loves himself and his black culture. There is no way to produce his incredible body of work without a love of black humanity and humanity at large.

While each album stands on its own, Wonder's fascination with and devotion to social change and liberation via incredible musical arrangements is mind boggling. We all have much to learn from this ballsy, leave it on the floor person. Any artist who believes in truth as power and allowing our minds to wander unfettered owes a huge, unpayable debt to this man.

Prince, by allowing his genius to take him wherever it chooses, is a direct result and influence of Mr. Wonder. Janelle Monae is another artist on some futuristic shit who has taken a page from the Wonder creativity book.

Perhaps my obsession has been brewing slowly. Maybe it started when as a struggling, broke-as-hell artist living in Harlem, I listened to him for guidance and reassurance that I could make it, create art and have a voice. Broke, scared and lonely, living in one cold room in Harlem, Stevie sustained me.

Perhaps it was 2008 when I was preparing for another life transition (moving to the West Coast) and was sure I could make it but unaware as to how. Listening to him nonstop helped me pull it together, face personal demons and press on towards a new dream.

Perhaps it is time to pursue two life long dreams that are centered around this incredible man. The first dream is having an opportunity to perform with this titan. While I have adored and appreciated several artists, I am not moved to share the stage and "work" with many of them.

My second dream regarding Mr. Wonder: A kick ass tribute band. Will I resurrect my dream? Is it time to let this dream go and create another? Stevie would not let go of a dream so why should I?

Here is my set list: *Sir Duke*, *Knocks Me Off My Feet*, *Superstition*, *As, Another Star*, *All in Love is Fair*, *Pastime Paradise*, *They Won't Go*.

There is a way to make art and a life that truly matters. There is a way to do it with substance and a conscious. This is my dream.

My First Black Gay Mentor: Essex Hemphill

When I came out, it was black men and being with them emotionally and physically that gave me such hope and excitement regarding my future.

I was 20 and full of longing. I believed that the torture and “not enoughness” that came from the mouths of men who looked like me (my grandfather being the exception) would be a thing of the past now that I could be honest and claim my desires.

I became heartbroken repeatedly when I met gorgeous young black men who flat out refused to challenge their thinking and truly examine their allegiance to a patriarchal, imperialist culture that provided few rewards but offered no love in return.

While love is powerful, it has its limits. As black men who are targeted in a particular set of ways, our healing needs to be addressed in a particular set of ways.

After surviving the initial five years of dating black men, I began reading Essex Hemphill. When I stumbled onto his most prolific statement: “the most revolutionary things black men can do is love each other”, I was hooked.

The first time I heard this brilliant solution to so much of what menaces us, I was thrilled and frightened. This concept seemed so simple and so foreign. Didn't sleeping with black men mean that you loved them? After reading a conversation between bell hooks and Essex Hemphill, I realized that sexual partnering and true love are not identical.

Essex helped me define what I wanted to be and transformed my thinking regarding what it meant to be black, gay and male. Essex showed me through his writing that to be handed the gift and power that comes with being black, gay and male was indeed an honor and nothing to be ashamed or apologetic about for any reason at any time.

To combine these most delicate and profound entities would require a warrior like spirit and the guts to walk tall in a world that often sees us as either dangerous or sexual and nothing more. Months after

discovering him via my voracious appetite for reading, I was able to meet and talk with him in person. Essex didn't choose an identity. He created one.

This was extremely important for my younger self who was being schooled in very White Supremacist self-hating ways. Creating an identity was very important for a young black queer who wanted to dream, create, evolve. Essex said you can do all of this and more.

Using his life as an example he illustrated to us young'uns that we could dare to be fabulous, outspoken, clear, unashamed and committed to evolution; by loving ourselves and those that look like us.

My desire for a certain type of man was solidified when I met and critically engaged with the great Essex Hemphill some twenty years ago. My love for black men was solidified.

Essex was the ideal black man: brave, brilliant, self reflective, gentle and committed to constant and unapologetic growth.

Why Every Queen Needs a Goddess

When *Private Dancer* hit the charts, I drove everybody around me nuts. While my parents constantly threatened to throw the goddamn album out the window if I continued to play it, I ignored their loving and gentle warnings and purchased another copy.

What my parents and all the other haters didn't understand was that I was seeking freedom. As a gay black kid trying to survive high school, Detroit in the 80's and AIDS as a ubiquitous reminder of what happens to boys who "like" boys, I felt trapped and targeted.

I longed for freedom, fame and fortune, and killer legs. In my adolescent mind, owning Turner-like gams would allow me to (benevolently) rule the world.

All gay men need their icons. All gay men need a bold, courageous bellwether who is unafraid to take up space, demand attention and create a world and reality of their own. As a persecuted minority, we all look toward those that demonstrate what can be achieved with perseverance, dogged determination and self confidence.

High school friends and family members teased me about this never-ending obsession with the old lady who was the Rock Goddess; I hummed every note on *Private Dancer* and entertained myself recreating every video move and dramatic interview.

While I couldn't rock a leather skirt or pants or heels or anything resembling leopard print, I lived for the denim jacket that reminded me that I could walk the tough streets of NYC and own them. Having idols and those that light the way are important.

Twenty years later, there is still not much that can match my frenzied devotion and allegiance to the Honky Tonk Angel. I have seen other singers attempt to blatantly and deliberately court myself and my gay brethren. At 47, I am the same age she was when she was at the height of her career and comeback.

My legs are good but not Tina good. Nothing says I have made it despite incredible odds like a pair of mile long stems and an attitude to match.

Why We Refused to Help Whitney

The first time I heard Whitney Houston sing, I was mesmerized. Having survived a lot of crappy music in 1985 and missing actual singing, I was thrilled the day I first heard *Saving All My Love*.

Being seventeen and not truly understanding the way the world and the vicious machine known as pop culture works, I remember feeling as if true talent had made a serious comeback. She was young, beautiful, could sing her ass off and was on her way to true superstardom and wealth, beyond anything any one of us or her famous family lineage could have imagined.

But what would be her eventual downfall would not be drugs or a ridiculous husband. Instead, she would be taken down by the same thing that plagues us all. Crippling low self-esteem and the inability to ascertain the help and resources to defeat these forces would eventually lead to an early death.

I have often wondered and stated aloud my confusion and pure disbelief that people who have access to so much, have so little emotional resource and coping skills.

This is the real problem that me as a fan and the people who know and enjoy worshipping at the throne of celebrity have created and would rather die than give up. On many levels, we have been lulled into believing that if a person is talented, famous and gorgeous that they either have no problems or should at least shut up about them because we want their "gifts".

We want them to share their talent and a part of this "sharing" is that the person doing the giving continues to give no matter the costs.

Nobody wants to think that you can have "the world" and still not be satisfied. Nobody wants to think that you can be famous and wealthy and have low self esteem, self doubt or even question whether or not you think you deserve such gifts and or praise.

As humans, we want the great opiate that is fame and fortune. We rarely long for the gift of self actualization. We rarely want anyone to be anything but what we've decided that they are.

Whitney could never win over her demons (self imposed or not) because there were too many people needing her to stay fucked up so

that they could maintain their lifestyles.

Where were her sister friends and people who truly had nothing to benefit from her remaining unhealthy?

A work colleague recently pointed out what generally happens when an individual makes self healing and improvement a priority. They have to go it alone.

Post being booed at the Soul Train Awards, why did the divas who long ago crossed over and learned to deal with the tricky landmine that is overwhelming success and love of white fans not come a running? A quick call from Earth or Diana or Tina could have been all the salve she needed to persevere.

As a black artist, I have also had to learn to navigate a world that sees my possibilities for magic and excellence limited to sports and R&B. My heart weeps knowing what it feels like to be deemed “less than” by people you expect to “know and do better”.

Nothing is more brutal than returning to the folks who initially loved you and then finding out that you have been ostracized for being too successful (white). This is a hurt that’s rarely talked about.

Must we equate success with whiteness only? Why do we limit our gifted artists and force them to choose an allegiance to either their culture of origin or the new position they have been able to create given their level of talent and hard work.

We could have done more than just offer prayers. Once again, the cult of celebrity seduced us all, myself included, into thinking that she would figure it out.

As participants in the miasma that is popular culture, we want to believe that artists should be able to succeed and yet can not wait for what all too often is the inevitable fall from grace.

We love the type of success that transforms humans into deities breathing rarefied air. We also love the very public spectacle of disaster and missteps that clearly states: you are one of us after all.

What a conundrum and recipe for disaster.

Trying to be one thing when you really are another or worse yet, not being allowed to express and be ok with all of your incongruities can make you wacky.

Perhaps she was a ghetto princess with the voice that didn’t fit well with that image. Perhaps, she was not of the ghetto at all. Maybe she was none of it or all of it (she did come around before the advent of

“ghetto fabulousness”).

Does her pedigree matter or is this the sinister magic of the marketing trolls run amock?

My Letter to Three Time Oscar Winner Viola Davis

Dear Ms. Davis, I am a huge fan and am writing this letter to let you know a couple of things.

First, you will win an Oscar or three as I said in my title. You are too present and wonderful in everything that you do. I have been acting for seventeen years and know of what I speak. our day is coming.

I would like to extend an opportunity to do all that I can to make sure that this occurs. I am a writer with his eye on getting into USC's Screenwriting Program in the very near and immediate future. I have been thinking about what my next move creatively would be and watching you on screen inspired me to truly go for it. Between us they won't know what hit 'em.

Recently a great friend who writes scifi fantasy (see my review for the novel *Solstice* on my website, February 29, 2012) wrote a kick butt article about not only the lack of roles for black actresses but also the depth of the roles they are "allowed" to play or get offered. On a Tavis Smiley interview you mentioned that a majority of the roles you are offered are peppered with ebonics.

I write in a number of voices and would love to see you play the femme fatale ala Eartha Kitt. You could definitely do this and you won't have to do it alone. Did I mention that I would be starring in this with you?

How sublime you would be in a role playing someone wicked, cunning, driven, smart and unapologetic. Having read so much Shakespeare and Tennessee Williams during my theater training, I could truly envision you reeking havoc and enjoying every moment of it.

A very layered and nuanced Matriarch who does what needs to be done much like Ms. Houston in *The Grifters* or Dorothy Dandridge in *Carmen Jones*.

You have inspired me to keep going. Have you considered episodic TV? Something where you would have to save the world on a weekly basis. Keep an eye out for my script, it's on the way,

Anthony Carter.

I Want To Be Evil... My Tribute To Eartha Kitt

When I talked with Eartha after her fabulous show, I was tongue tied. My love affair with the fantabuolus Eartha and the only cat woman that mattered began early. At seven, much to my father's embarrassment, I enjoyed purring like the odd woman on *Batman*. There was something enchanting about this creature.

Long before I knew what power was and how to yield it, I watched her reduce men to piles of goo with a sigh, an exaggerated expression or a chuckle that stated: "I adore me, don't you?" My desire to dream and do things can be tied to this exceptional human who continued to defy odds and recreate herself and a place in society even though she was told early and often that there was none.

As a kid growing up and well into my 20's, I knew very little of her contributions not only to the world of performing arts, but her struggle for civil rights and personal and artistic freedom. Many years of hearing that purr and all of that sensual energy let me dismiss her as just a sexy enchantress. She was that and so much more.

While we like the persona she created, there was much to share in terms of speaking out, risking it all for art and the people, and then being punished for it all. As a gay, black artist I, too, am often taken to task for not doing what black artists are expected to do (which no one has explained to me).

Ms. Eartha taught me to dream and to push beyond what everyone, myself included, thinks is possible. And go for more.

After devouring not one but two books about her fascinating life, it was apparent to me that she had a life worth imitating. That she was often lauded but seldom understood. Breaking through color barriers and performing on Broadway and in NYC cabarets, she forced the world to rethink what was possible for a female artist of color.

Whether performing in New Faces on Broadway, an extended engagement in a NYC Nightclub or fending off Orson Welles in the back of a taxi, Ms. Eartha was bad to the bone then and handled her business before any of us had business of our own to handle.

When I witnessed her magic in person at 78 years old (feisty,

naughty, still doing back bends, rocking a dress with side splits to her waist and driving men crazy) I thought to myself this is what great art is made to do and this is what great artists can and must do.

Still doing two shows nightly and singing in six languages for weeks on end truly floored me. Watching her work was a study in viewing perfection and a person highly comfortable with their self. This is something we should all aspire to.



Anthony Carter is a writer and cultural critic. Among his books are *Ask the Old Guy*, *Kiss Me Kill Me: Trayvon Martin*, *Black Male Bodies and White Supremacy*, *Rules of Reality* and this new collection dedicated to black excellence: *Twice as Good*. Recently he launched a video series *Visionaries and Truthtellers*, which can be found on his website. *Burn the Manual*, his weekly column, is his contribution to the *Good Men Project* site. He is always on the hunt for the perfect brownie and red velvet cupcake. He and his husband are joyfully co-raising nine grandchildren. Visit him online at Anthony-Carter.com.