Belonging
A Culture of Place

bell hooks
Belonging
Belonging: A CULTURE OF PLACE

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To dancing in a circle of love — to living in beloved community

I am grateful for everyone in Berea for welcoming me — for giving me a place to belong —

And I especially give thanks for Pete Carpenter, Paige Cordial, Timi Reedy, Jane Post, Vicky and Clarence Hayes, Bobby Craig, Eugene Powell, Susan King, Stephanie Browner, Linda, Alina, Libby, Peggy, Tammy, Mayor Steve Connelly, Vernon, Angela, and all my Kentucky family.
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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 me 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 for 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 in 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, aesthetics, and the imaginative process. Writing about the past often places one at risk of 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 her memory, to move swiftly into a place of forgetfulness from 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.
Kentucky Is My Fate

If one has chosen to live mindfully, then choosing a place to die is as vital as choosing where and how to live. Choosing to return to the land and landscape of my childhood, the world of my Kentucky upbringing, I am comforted by the knowledge that I could die here. This is the way I imagine “the end”: I close my eyes and see hands holding a Chinese red lacquer bowl, walking to the top of the Kentucky hill I call my own, scattering my remains as though they are seeds and not ash, a burnt offering on solid ground vulnerable to the wind and rain — all that is left of my body gone, my being shifted, passed away, moving forward on and into eternity. I imagine this farewell scene and it solaces me; Kentucky hills were where my life began. They represent the place of promise and possibility and the location of all my terrors, the monsters that follow me and haunt my dreams. Freely roaming Kentucky hills in childhood, running from snakes and all forbidden outside terrors, both real and imaginary, I learn to be safe in the knowledge that facing what I fear and moving beyond it will keep me secure. With this knowledge I nurtured a sublime trust in the power of nature to seduce, excite, delight, and solace.

Nature was truly a sanctuary, a place of refuge, a place for healing wounds. Heeding the call to be one with nature, I returned to the one
state where I had known a culture of belonging. My life in Kentucky, my girlhood life, is divided into neat lines demarcating before and after. Before is the isolated life we lived as a family in the Kentucky hills, a life where the demarcations of race, class, and gender did not matter. What mattered was the line separating country and city — nature mattered. My life in nature was the Before and the After was life in the city where money and status determined everything. In the country our class had no importance. In our home we were surrounded by hills. Only the front windows of our house looked out on a solitary road constructed for the men seeking to find oil, all other windows faced hills. In our childhood, the rarely traveled road held no interest. The hills in the back of our house were the place of magic and possibility, a lush green frontier, where nothing man made could run us down, where we could freely seek adventure.

When we left the hills to settle in town where the schools were supposedly better, where we could attend the big important church, Virginia Street Baptist (all things we were told would make us better, would make it possible for us to be somebody), I experienced my first devastating loss, my first deep grief. I wanted to stay in the solitude of those hills. I longed for freedom. That longing was imprinted on my consciousness in the hills that seemed to declare that all sweetness in life would come when we seek freedom. Folks living in the Kentucky hills prized independence and self-reliance above all traits.

While my early sense of identity was shaped by the anarchic life of the hills, I did not identify with being Kentuckian. Racial separatism, white exploitation and oppression of black folks were so widespread, it pained my already hurting heart. Nature was the place where one could escape the world of man-made constructions of race and identity. Living isolated in the hills we had very little contact with the world of white dominator culture. Away from the hills, dominator culture and its power over our lives were constant. Back then all black people knew that the white supremacist State with all its power did not care for the welfare of black folks. What we had learned in the
hills was how to care for ourselves by growing crops, raising animals, living deep in the earth. What we had learned in the hills was how to be self-reliant.

Nature was the foundation of our counter-hegemonic black subculture. Nature was the place of victory. In the natural environment, everything had its place, including humans. In that environment everything was likely to be shaped by the reality of mystery. There dominator culture (the system of imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy) could not wield absolute power. For in that world, nature was more powerful. Nothing and no one could completely control nature. In childhood I experienced a connection between an unspoiled natural world and the human desire for freedom.

Folks who lived in the hills were committed to living free. Hillbilly folk chose to live above the law, believing in the right of each individual to determine the manner in which they would live their lives. Living among Kentucky mountain folk was my first experience of a culture based on anarchy. Folks living in the hills believed that freedom meant self-determination. One might live with less, live in a makeshift shack and yet feel empowered because the habits of informing daily life were made according to one’s own values and beliefs. In the hills individuals felt they had governance over their lives. They made their own rules.

Away from the city, in the city, rules were made by unknown others and were imposed and enforced. In the hills of my childhood, white and black folks often lived in a racially integrated environment, with boundaries determined more by chosen territory than race. The notion of “private property” was an alien one; the hills belonged to everyone or so it seemed to me in my childhood. In those hills there was nowhere I felt I could not roam, nowhere I could not go.

Living in the city I learned the depths of white subordination of black folks. While we were not placed on reservations, black folks were forced to live within boundaries in the city, ones that were not formally demarcated, but boundaries marked by white supremacist violence
against black people if lines were crossed. Our segregated black neighbor-
bhoods were sectioned off, made separate. At times they abutted the homes of poor and destitute white folks. Neither of these groups lived near the real white power and privilege governing all our lives.

In public school in the city we were taught that Kentucky was a border state, a state that did not take an absolute position on the issue of white supremacy, slavery, and the continued domination of black folks by powerful whites. In school we were taught to believe that Kentucky was not like the deep South. No matter that segregation enforced by violence shaped these institutions of learning, that schools took children regularly to the Jefferson Davis monument, to places where the confederacy and the confederate flag were praised. To black folks it seemed strange that powerful Kentucky white folks could act as though a fierce white supremacy did not exist in “their” state. We saw little difference between the ways black folks were exploited and oppressed in Kentucky and the lives of black folks in other parts of the South, places like Alabama, Mississippi, and Georgia. By the time I graduated from high school, my yearning to leave Kentucky had intensified. I wanted to leave the fierce racial apartheid that governed the lives of black folks. I wanted to find the place of freedom.

Yet it was my flight from Kentucky, my traveling all the way to the west coast, to California, that revealed to me the extent to which my sense and sensibility were deeply informed by the geography of place. The year I began my undergraduate education at Stanford University there were few students coming there from the state of Kentucky. I was certainly the only black student from Kentucky. And the prevailing social mores of racism meant that white Kentuckians did not seek my company. It was during this first year at Stanford that I realized the stereotypes about Kentucky that prevailed in the world beyond our region. Few folks there, at Stanford, knew anything about life in Kentucky. Usually, when asked where I hailed from, naming Kentucky as my home state would be greeted with laughter. Or with the question. “Kentucky — where is that?”
Every now and then in those undergraduate years I would meet a fellow student who was sincere in their desire to hear about life in Kentucky, and I would talk about the natural world there, the lushness of our landscape, the waterfall at Blue Lake where I played as a child. I would talk about the caves and the trails left by the displaced Cherokee Indians. I would talk about an Appalachia that was black and white, about the shadow of cold dust on the bodies of black men coming home from working in the mines. I would talk about fields of tobacco, about the horses that make the Kentucky bluegrass a field of enchantment. I would talk with pride about the black male jockeys who were at the center of the horse racing events before imperialist white supremacist capitalist imposed rigid rules of racial segregation forcing black folks away from the public world of Kentucky horse culture.

Separating black folks, especially black jockeys, from the world of Kentucky horse culture went hand in hand with the rise in white supremacist thinking. For us it meant living with a culture of fear where we learned to fear the land, the animals, where we became fearful of the moist munching mouths of horses black jockeys would rarely ride again. This separation from nature and the concomitant fear it produced, fear of nature and fear of whiteness, was the trauma shaping black life. In our psycho history, meaning the culture of southern black folk living during the age of fierce legally condoned racial apartheid, the face of terror will always be white. And symbols of that whiteness will always engender fear. The confederate flag, for example, will never stand for heritage for black folks. It still awakens fear in the minds and imaginations of elder black folks for whom it signaled the support of a white racist assault on blackness.

White folks who mask their denial of white supremacy by mouthing slogans like “heritage not hate” to support their continued allegiance to this flag, fail to see that their refusal to acknowledge what this “heritage” means for black folks is itself an expression of white racist power and privilege. For the confederate flag is a symbol of both heritage and hate. The history of the confederacy will always evoke the
memory of white oppression of black folks with rebel flags, guns, fire, and the hanging noose — all symbols of hate. And even though many poor and disenfranchised white Kentuckians struggling to make their way through the minefield of capitalist white power mimic and claim this history of colonial power, they can never really possess the power and privilege of capitalist whiteness. They may embrace this symbol to connect them to that very world and that past which denied their humanity, but it will never change the reality of their domination by those very same forces of white supremacist hegemony.

Growing up in that world of Kentucky culture where the racist aspect of the confederate past was glorified, a world that for the most part attempted to obscure and erase the history of black Kentuckians, I could not find a place for myself in this heritage. Even though I can now see in retrospect that there were always two competing cultures in Kentucky, the world of mainstream white supremacist capitalist power and the world of defiant anarchy that championed freedom for everyone. And the way in which that culture of anarchy had distinct anti-racist dimensions accounts for the unique culture of Appalachian black folks that is rarely acknowledged. It is this culture Loyal Jones writes about in Appalachian Values when he explains: “Many mountaineers, as far South as Alabama and Georgia were anti-slavery in sentiment and fought for the Union in the Civil War, and although Reconstruction legislatures imposed anti-Negro laws, thus training us in segregation, Appalachians for the most part, have not been saddled with the same prejudices against black people that other southerners have.” Even though I spent my early childhood around mountain white folks who did not show overt racism, and even though this world of racial integration in Kentucky hills had been a part of my upbringing, shaping my sense and sensibility, our move away from that culture into the mainstream world and its values meant that it was white supremacy which shaped and informed the nature of our lives once we were no longer living in the hills. It was this legacy of racial threat and hate that engendered in me the desire to leave Kentucky and not return.
Leaving Kentucky I believed I would leave the terror of whiteness behind but that fear followed me. Away from my native place I learned to recognize the myriad faces of racism, racial prejudice and hatred, the shape-shifting nature of white supremacy. During my first year at Stanford University, I felt for the first time the way in which geographical origins could separate citizens of the same nation. I did not feel a sense of belonging at Stanford University, I constantly felt like an unwanted outsider. Just as I found solace in nature in Kentucky, the natural environment, trees, grass, plants, the sky in Palo Alto, California, all offered me a place of solace. Digging in the California ground my hands touched earth that was so different from the moist red and brown dirt of Kentucky I felt awe. Wonder permeated my senses as I pondered the fact that traveling thousands of miles away from my native place had actually changed the very ground under my feet. Then I could not understand how the earth could be my witness in this strange land if it could not be a mirror into which I could see reflected the world of my ancestors, the landscape of my dreams. How could this new land hold me upright, provide me the certainty that the ground of my being was sound?

Seeking an experience of intellectual life in the academic world I entered an environment based on principles of uncertainty, an opportunistic world where everything changes and ends. I longed to return to my native place where there was fierce reluctance to accept change. Kentucky is one of the states in our nation known for its hard-headed refusal to embrace change. In the old days most Kentucky folks wanted everything to pass down from generation to generation unchanged. This refusal to promote change was most evident in the arena of race relations. White folks in the state of Kentucky kept racial segregation the norm long after other states had made significant progress in the direction of civil rights.

Conservative white Kentuckians told themselves “the blacks don’t want change — they like the way things are.” Having reduced black folks to a state of traumatic powerlessness, racist white folks saw no
problem with the intimate racial terrorism that they enacted which led them to believe that they could know the mind and hearts of black folks, that they could own our desires. Efforts on the part of conservative white Kentuckians to exploit and oppress black folk were congruent with the effort to erase and destroy the rebellious sensibility of white mountain folk. The anarchist spirit which had surfaced in the culture of white hillbillies was as much a threat to the imperialist white supremacist capitalist state as any notion of racial equality and racial integration. Consequently this culture, like the distinctive habits of black agrarian folk, had to be disrupted and ultimately targeted for destruction.

Leaving Kentucky, fleeing the psycho history of traumatic powerlessness, I took with me from the sub-cultures of my native state (mountain folk, hillbillies, Appalachians) a positive understanding of what it means to know a culture of belonging, that cultural legacy handed down to me by my ancestors. In her book *Rebalancing the World*, Carol Lee Flinders defines a culture of belonging as one in which there is “intimate connection with the land to which one belongs, empathic relationship to animals, self-restraint, custodial conservation, deliberateness, balance, expressiveness, generosity, egalitarianism, mutuality, affinity for alternative modes of knowing, playfulness, inclusiveness, nonviolent conflict resolution, and openness to spirit.” All these ways of belonging were taught to me in my early childhood but these imprints were covered over by the received biased knowledge of dominator culture. Yet they become the subjugated knowledge that served to fuel my adult radicalism.

Living away from my native place, I become more consciously Kentuckian than I was when I lived at home. This is what the experience of exile can do, change your mind, utterly transform one’s perception of the world of home. The differences geographical location imprinted on my psyche and habits of being became more evident away from home. In Kentucky no one had thought I had a Kentucky accent, but in California speaking in the soft black southern
vernacular that was our everyday speech made me the subject of unwanted attention. In a short period of time I learned to change my way of speaking, to keep the sounds and cadences of Kentucky secret, an intimate voice to be heard only by folks who could understand. Not speaking in the tongue of my ancestors was a way to silence ridicule about Kentucky. It was a way to avoid being subjugated by the geographical hierarchies around me which deemed my native place country, backwards, a place outside time. I learned more about Kentucky during my undergraduate years as I placed the portrait of a landscape I knew intimately alongside the stereotypical way of seeing that world as it was represented by outsiders.

Perhaps my greatest sense of estrangement in this new liberal college environment was caused by the overall absence among my professors and peers of any overtly expressed belief in Christianity and God. Indeed, it was far more cool in those days to announce that one was agnostic or atheist than to talk about belief in God. Coming from a Bible-toting, Bible-talking world where scripture was quoted in everyday conversations, I lacked the psychological resources and know-how to positively function in a world where spiritual faith was regarded with as much disdain as being from the geographical south. In my dormitory the one student who openly read from scripture, a quiet white male student from a Mormon background, was more often than not alone and isolated. We talked to one another and endeavored to make each other feel less like strangers in a strange land. We talked scripture. But talking scripture was not powerful enough to erase the barriers created by racism that had taught us to fear and beware difference. And even though there were organized Christian groups on campus, they did not speak the religious language I was accustomed to hearing.

By the end of my second year of college, I began to question the religious beliefs of my family, the way of religion I had been taught back home. In the new age spiritual environment of California, I fash-