



Hannah Arendt, James Baldwin, and the Politics of Love

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Abstract

Does love have a place in the inherently conflictual realm of democratic politics, particularly in a racialized democracy? This article engages the question of love's politics by way of Hannah Arendt's critique of James Baldwin's "Letter from a Region in My Mind." Troubled by his "gospel of love," Arendt wrote to Baldwin, warning him that in politics, love will achieve nothing "except hypocrisy." Contra Arendt, who argues that love is antipolitical, I show how Baldwin utilizes love to reclaim the lost promise of American democracy. Synthesizing Baldwin's essays published between 1955–1972, my argument proceeds in two parts: part 1 focuses on the psychological and embodied demands of love, which, for Baldwin, are vital in transforming the consciousness of white and black Americans. Part 2 focuses on Baldwin's critique of property, linking the project of self-transformation to the need for structural transformation. I show how love enables us to condemn the exploitative logic of capitalism and imagine new modes of relationality. In charting this underexplored point of contact between these thinkers, this article complicates Arendt's critique of love and sheds new light on the role of love in Baldwin's political thought.

Keywords

Hannah Arendt, James Baldwin, race, love, democracy

In observation of the fiftieth anniversary of James Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time*, a group of intellectuals and activists published a collection of essays titled *The Fire This Time*. Reflecting on the legacy of Baldwin's political thought and the ongoing struggles of black Americans, the essays testify to both Baldwin's perceptiveness and the enduring mutability of white supremacy. Yet few essays referenced Baldwin on love, and perhaps this is justifiable in a moment marked by uncertainty and hatred. Indeed, the tone-deafness of calls for "love not hate" and platitudes like "love always wins," which belie the terror of our political moment ought to give us pause. Yet the conspicuously absent discussion of Baldwin on love, as well as the dissonance of these invocations, pose the question: does love have a place in the inherently conflictual realm of democratic politics, particularly in a democracy wrought by the public resurgence of a white supremacist order?

Although love is fraught ground, black scholars and activists are already moving the public discourse in a more thoughtful direction. Speaking to "White America" as a child of "Socrates, James Baldwin, and Audre Lorde," George Yancy has demanded, "*I want you to listen with love. Well, at least try.*" Drawing on Baldwin, Yancy (2015) maintains that only black Americans can "help you to see yourself in ways that you have not seen before," and the price of that ticket is love. Although

Yancy was met with death threats, not love, his labors reveal the vulnerability that love demands and that whites continue to evade. Likewise, Utz McKnight has framed white indifference toward black suffering as a deficit of love, posing the question, "Where is the love that you promised?" Reflecting on the unfulfilled promises of the Civil Rights Era, McKnight argues, "The value of Blacks in America is measured by how much Whites need them. Once they don't care, Black people are no longer necessary. We remain a problem for the society" (McKnight 2014). For both Yancy and McKnight, love remains a corrective to white supremacy, demanding both psychological and structural transformation.

Nor is it incidental that the language of "Black Lives Matter" originated in a "love letter" to black Americans. Alicia Garza, a cofounder of the network, has repeatedly proclaimed, "Our movement is one grounded in love" (Fusion 2016). On Garza's account, love is integral to both the organizational network and the movement at large, and this commitment is reflected in the network platform's call for "loving engagement"

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(Garza, Cullors, and Tometi 2016). For these activists, love connotes a way of being and acting in the world that prepares one for the conflict that is not only essential to undoing white supremacy but endemic to democratic politics.

In the hope of reorienting us toward Baldwin on love, this article revisits Hannah Arendt's twofold critique of neighborly love and intimate love, which she leveled against Baldwin's "Letter from a Region in my Mind." In a 1962 letter, Arendt responded to Baldwin's essay, which appeared in *The New Yorker* and later composed much of *The Fire Next Time*. In that essay, Baldwin (1998, 347) confronted "America's racial nightmare," insisting that "the relatively conscious whites and the relatively conscious blacks . . . must, like lovers, insist on, or create, the consciousness of the others." Arendt (1962), troubled by Baldwin's "gospel of love," wrote, "In politics, love is a stranger, and when it intrudes upon it nothing is being achieved except hypocrisy." This hypocrisy arises from the antipolitical effects of neighborly love, which suppresses our uniqueness, as well as intimate love, which prevents us from forming relationships of equality. For Arendt, who regards plurality as the condition of action, and therefore the precondition of freedom, love eviscerates the very possibility of politics. Love must remain private, Arendt (1958, 242) argues, or it will become "not only apolitical but antipolitical, perhaps the most powerful of all antipolitical human forces."

Yet in his essays published between 1955 and 1972, Baldwin repeatedly invokes love in ways that preserve, rather than sublimate, plurality, complicating Arendt's critique. In what follows, I first outline Arendt's critique of neighborly love and intimate love, then turn to Baldwin's essays. My reading proceeds into two parts: part 1 focuses on the psychological and embodied dimensions of love. Baldwin, I argue, diagnoses whiteness as a condition of lovelessness, drawing together both the psychological and embodied effects of racial innocence, and also conceives of love as a tactic of survival and resistance for black Americans, charting a path toward self-transformation. Part 2 links the project of self-transformation—love's psychological and embodied demands—to the need for structural transformation. Here, I link love to Baldwin's critique of property, showing how love enables us to condemn the exploitative logic of capitalist social relations and imagine new modes of relationality. In charting this largely unexplored point of contact between these two thinkers, this article complicates Arendt's critique of love and sheds new light on Baldwin's political thought, showing how love might enable us to reclaim the lost promise of American democracy.

Love and the Problem of Plurality

Arendt's critique of love centers on the concept of plurality, with its "twofold character of equality and distinction." For Arendt (1958, 175–76), plurality both relates and distinguishes us—we are united by our shared humanity, yet each human represents a set of unique possibilities:

If men were not equal, they could neither understand each other and those who came before them nor plan for the future and foresee the needs of those who will come after them. If men were not distinct, each human being distinguished from any other who is, was, or will ever be, they would need neither speech nor action to make themselves understood.

Corresponding to this twofold character of plurality, Arendt's critique of love is twofold in its concern with the antipolitical effects of neighborly love and intimate love. This critique of neighborly love first appears in Arendt's dissertation on St. Augustine, while her concerns regarding intimate love appear in *The Human Condition*. The trouble with neighborly love is that it absolves humans of the characteristics that make distinction possible, while the intrusion of intimate love into the public realm prevents us from maintaining relationships of equality. Love threatens both elements of plurality and, therefore, the very possibility of politics.

In her dissertation, Arendt argues that neighborly love, or *caritas*, is antipolitical because it sublimates our uniqueness, that dimension of plurality that distinguishes us. *Caritas* requires that one loves their neighbor with a "sublime indifference of what or who he is" (Arendt 1996, 43). Contra Arendt, who names plurality as the condition of action, and therefore the precondition of freedom, *caritas* sublimates our uniqueness. In emulating God's unconditional love, *caritas* disavows the significance of our uniqueness in public life:

Now he loves and hates as God does. By renouncing himself man at the same time renounces all worldly relations . . . In this way the neighbor loses the meaning of his concrete worldly existence, for example, as a friend or enemy. (Arendt 1996, 94)

Man and neighbor become untethered from the characteristics that distinguish and relate them in public life, losing all sense of their uniqueness. For Arendt, who refuted the title of philosopher and posited herself as a theorist because *men not man* inhabit the earth, *caritas* sublimates the plurality that gives politics both purpose and form.

Arendt (1958, 242) widens this critique in *The Human Condition*, foreshadowing her letter to Baldwin in near identical language: "Love, by its very nature, is

unworldly . . . it is not only apolitical but antipolitical, perhaps the most powerful of all antipolitical human forces.” Here, though, Arendt concerns herself with intimate love. While both neighborly and intimate love involve a renunciation of the world, each lover renounces their worldly bonds in different ways. In loving as God does, neighborly love requires that we renounce the significance of our uniqueness, that condition of action that gives purpose to public life. Yet this loss of worldliness is experienced without actually foreclosing the “in-between” that separates and relates two neighbors; this “in-between” simply loses its worldly significance.

By contrast, the passion of intimate love forecloses the distance between two individuals, eradicating “the in-between which relates us to and separates us from others” (Arendt 1958, 242). Only a child can insert a new in-between that relates and separates two lovers. Thus, while neighborly love involves a form of intimacy that is wholly unproductive, intimate love retains an element of worldliness because of its reproductive potential. Indeed, if “[t]he miracle that saves the world, the realm of human affairs, from its normal, ‘natural’ ruin is ultimately the fact of natality,” then it is the arrival of children, and the beginnings they represent, that makes the continuity of this “fact” possible (Arendt 1958, 247). Thus, while intimate love involves a renunciation of politics, it is only “perhaps” antipolitical because it also produces new beginnings that sustain our shared world.¹

While neighborly love negates plurality by renouncing the significance of our differences, intimate love confirms the fact of plurality, our uniqueness as humans by revealing to someone *who* we are. Describing it as “one of the rarest occurrences in human lives,” Arendt (1958, 242) acknowledges that intimate love “. . . indeed possesses an unequal power of self-revelation and an unequal clarity of vision for the disclosure of *who*.” Both love and action involve a revelatory disclosure of the *who*, but differ in their temporality and location. The revelatory character of love inheres in the experience of love, in the course of intimacy. *Who* somebody is will never be clearer than in that moment. Our memories can preserve something of that “who,” and we might seek to share those feelings and memories, but the clarity of that vision can never be fully shared with others.

In contrast to the immediate, embodied self-disclosure of intimate love, the disclosure of the *who* through action coheres in remembrance and storytelling. The process character of action, which unfolds within an “already existing web” of human relations, ensures that its effects are only fully understood long after their performance. Indeed, Arendt (1958, 186) maintains that only our biographies can make tangible that “originally intangible manifestation of a distinct ‘who’ that appears through action and speech.” As Markell (2006, 7) argues, our actions constitute a ‘second birth,’ which for Arendt, arises from the fact that our

natality represents an altogether novel set of possibilities. In contrast to the private self-disclosure of intimate love, this revelation of the *who* through action only coheres through public remembrance and storytelling.

Although intimate love may show us *who* somebody is, “it is concerned to the point of total unworldliness with *what* the loved person may be,” and therein lies its antipolitical potential. For Arendt (1958, 181), it is our “qualities and shortcomings . . . [our] achievements, failings, and transgressions,” that demonstrate *what* we are. To be sure, describing *what* someone is will never fully capture that person’s uniqueness—that description will never show us *who* they are:

The moment we want to say *who* somebody is, our very vocabulary leads us astray into saying *what* he is; we get entangled in a description of qualities he necessarily shares with others like him; we begin to describe a type or a “character” in the old meaning of the word, with the result that his specific uniqueness escapes us.

From the ancient Greek *kharakter*, this old meaning refers to a type or nature, an “engraved mark” that is distinguishing and defining but also replicable and recurring. Traits like bravery and cowardice, honesty and deceptiveness reveal *what* somebody is, enabling us to form and maintain relationships of equality. While intimate love may reveal *who* someone is, it also prevents us from understanding that person’s shortcomings or misdeeds. When we universalize intimate love into a way of being, extending it to every citizen unconditionally, we cease to judge others according to their character, their words, and deeds, destroying any form of common standards or political accountability. In doing so, we cease to care for the world, to express that “deep affection for something other than human selves, namely, for the complex, extrasubjective ‘web’ that constitutes the conditions of our lives” (Myers 2013, 87). Thus, love involves an abdication of the care, or *amor mundi*, which Myers shows is central to Arendt’s politics.

Although I have suggested that Arendt’s concerns regarding love are at least twofold, her letter to Baldwin—addressed November 21, 1962—collapses together these critiques of neighborly and intimate love. Opening her letter by praising Baldwin’s essay as “a political event of a very high order,” Arendt (1962) first ascribes a political dimension to Baldwin’s formulation of “the Negro question” that marks a shift from her essay “Reflections on Little Rock,” published three years earlier. Rather than frame Baldwin’s condemnation of racial innocence as a social matter, Arendt concedes the political significance of his concerns.²

Arendt then expresses her fright at “the gospel of love which you begin to preach at the end,” signaling that she is reading Baldwin’s text within the Christian tradition of neighborly love. Indeed, Baldwin’s own references to his childhood in the church and the biblical quality of his

writing, coupled with Arendt's usage of "gospel," suggests that her concerns center on the issue of distinction raised in her dissertation. However, Arendt (1962) pivots from this line of thinking, instead advising Baldwin that "In politics, love is a stranger, and when it intrudes upon it nothing is being achieved except hypocrisy." Rather than invoke her critique of neighborly love, Arendt (1958, 51–52) draws from a near-identical argument in *The Human Condition*, wherein she argues that intimate love is not only "extinguished, the moment it is displayed in public," but that it ". . . can only become false and perverted when it is used for political purposes such as the change or salvation of the world." In both texts, Arendt maintains that love is an antipolitical force because it negates plurality, the precondition of freedom—yet it is unclear whether it is equality or distinction at stake, or perhaps both.

Given its antipolitical nature, Arendt (1962) argues that Baldwin's "gospel of love" is only viable among oppressed groups in pre- or apolitical spaces:

All the characteristics you stress in the Negro people: their beauty, their capacity for joy, their warmth and their humanity, are all well-known characteristics of all oppressed people. They grow out of suffering and they are the proudest possessions of all pariahs. Unfortunately, they have never survived the hour of liberation by even five minutes. Hatred and love belong together, and they are both destructive; you can afford them only in the private and, as a people, only so long as you are not free.

Such intimacy can only sustain itself under conditions of political invisibility, dissipating under the *polis'* bright lights. This critique mirrors Arendt's 1959 acceptance address for the Lessing Prize. In this speech, later published in *Men in Dark Times*, Arendt does not directly mention love, yet she speaks of the Jew as "pariah" in ways that foreshadow her letter to Baldwin. Jews' experiences of persecution have driven them so close together that the world—our shared in-between—has vanished altogether. Although they enjoy greater warmth, intimacy, ". . . a kindness and sheer goodness of which human beings are otherwise scarcely capable," such pariahs pay dearly: they become worldless (Arendt 1970, 13). Like her account of intimate love, Arendt maintains that warmth and intimacy can only be maintained in private, or in the absence of an in-between that both distinguishes and relates us.³

Arendt's concerns regarding love are not without merit. Indeed, Baldwin acknowledges that the warmth and comfort he describes in "Letter from a Region in My Mind" cannot endure beyond the moment of liberation. In a late interview—and in his only known response to Arendt—Baldwin acknowledges that certain effects of oppression are transient and fragile:

Hannah Arendt told me that the virtues I described in *The New Yorker* piece—the sensuality I was talking about, and the warmth, and the fish fries, and all that—are typical of all oppressed people. And they don't, unluckily, she said—and I think she's entirely right—survive even five minutes the end of their oppression. (Stanley and Pratt 1989, 75)

The "end of oppression" for black Americans could open a world of possibilities in which sensuality and warmth are no longer preeminent political concerns. These concerns lose their urgency when one no longer has to "make do with the minimum" (Stanley and Pratt 1989, 75). The trouble with Baldwin's concession is twofold: first, it understates his emphasis on love as a technique of survival and resistance, which remains crucial on the foreseeable horizon. Second, it presupposes that love is solely or predominantly an experience of warmth and comfort, a quality that Baldwin himself repeatedly complicates.

Love and the Project of Self-transformation

For Baldwin, although love may sometimes entail warmth and comfort, it also demands psychological and embodied self-transformation. Indeed, Baldwin (1998, 346) concludes *The Fire Next Time* by calling upon the "relatively conscious" to, "like lovers," insist upon and remake the consciousness of others. Speaking of love as a "state of being," that necessitates "quest and daring and growth," Baldwin (1998, 341) eschews the warmth and comfort of unconditional love that he also expresses toward every person. Instead, Baldwin demands that his audience act "like lovers" by working to transform the consciousness of their fellow citizens. The emphasis on *like*, is, I believe, crucial. To demand that we act *like* lovers suggests that, for Baldwin, love—and its bearing on democratic politics—is a concept that draws from the psychological and embodied experience of being in love. Acting *like* lovers suggests that we cannot love all our fellow citizens, especially not all the time, but we can engage with them—and ourselves—in ways that are informed by love. Acting *like* lovers demands that we recognize how close violence and love run together, to recognize that "these tensions are rooted in the very depths as those from which love springs, or murder," and to guard against the violent impulses that are visited in the name of love (Baldwin 1998, 341). Acting *like* lovers unites the psychological and the embodied—it forces us to examine how America's racial nightmare is not only a matter of psychological disconnect and historical disavowal but a matter of sensual sterility, that is, an inability to partake in the sensual and affective pleasures of life.

In what follows, I show how by deriving a concept of love from the experience of loving, Baldwin lays open the possibility of personal transformation for both white and black Americans by offering a way of being and acting in the world informed by what it means to act *like* lovers.

Lovelessness and the Pathologies of Whiteness

Although he seeks to love everyone unconditionally, Baldwin also utilizes love as a diagnostic tool to critique whiteness as a condition of lovelessness. Indeed, loving white people never precludes Baldwin from criticizing what they have become: loveless. This lovelessness arises from the unexamined lives of those who profess their racial innocence, and this historical detachment produces an embodied, sensual disconnect. Yet in framing whiteness as a condition of lovelessness, Baldwin also prescribes love as a way to resolve those pathologies, to reclaim an uncorrupted sense of oneself through self-examination and a restoration of one's capacity for sensuality. Thus, contrary to Arendt's concerns, love does not suppress human uniqueness, but, rather, fortifies that uniqueness by restoring white Americans' sense of positionality and history.

In *No Name in the Street*, Baldwin argues that whiteness, with all of its pathologies, is best understood as a condition of lovelessness. In an unwelcome sexual encounter with a drunken white southern man, Baldwin (1998, 391) recounts,

I watched his eyes, thinking, with great sorrow, *The unexamined life is not worth living*. The despair among the loveless is that they must narcotize themselves before they can touch any human being at all. They, then, fatally, touch the wrong person, not merely because they have gone blind, or have lost the sense of touch, but because they no longer have any way of knowing that any loveless touch is a violation, whether one is touching a woman or a man.

At first glance, this man hardly seems loveless: he is about town, married with children, well-known, and respected within his community. His troubles, however, are twofold: first, that he leads a life that is "unexamined," which blindly claims no part in white supremacy, and therefore fails to ascertain his own historical position in relation to white supremacy. To become capable of love, this man would have to not only consider his own fraudulent innocence but also reach into the past, examining the ways in which his willingness to violate Baldwin is historically produced. In both his earliest work, *Notes of a Native Son*, and his later work, *No Name in the Street*, Baldwin (1998, 469, 13) recounts the ways in which whites eagerly evade the complexity of black Americans

by claiming a fraudulent innocence: "In overlooking, denying, evading his complexity—which is nothing more than the disquieting complexity of ourselves—we are diminished and we perish." As Jack Turner (2012, 109) argues, it is this "[h]istorical self-understanding, for Baldwin, [that] becomes the basis for personal freedom." This man, like other Americans, Baldwin argues, regard themselves as inheritors of a great legacy without ever understanding the violent history underlying that inheritance, or challenging themselves to embody or enact those ideals.

Second, from that historical detachment, this man has become unable to touch without doing violence—unable to experience human sensuality, he has become *loveless*. Instead, this man can only "narcotize" himself before claiming Baldwin as his sexual prerogative, forcing intimacy through violence. This man's act of sexual terror is symptomatic of not just a historical, but a sensual disconnect, which plagues those who cling to their fraudulent innocence. In *The Fire Next Time*, Baldwin (1962, 43) shows that the preservation of racial innocence—a psychological disconnect from one's own positionality and history—also engenders a loss of sensuality, that is, a capacity "to respect and rejoice in the force of life, of life itself, and to be *present* in all that one does, from the effort of loving to the breaking of bread." Sensuality, that is, the capacity to be present in one's experiences, is diminished as one becomes entrapped in the moral and intellectual acrobatics of white supremacy, in maintaining the dissonance between the perceived and actual foundations of supposedly meritocratic privileges. Living beneath these layers of mythology, which hang like second skins, this loss of sensuality corrupts our perception of the world and our capacity to recognize the humanity that distinguishes and relates us. This is why Baldwin experiences that man's sensual deprivation as a loveless violence, which seeks recognition from the subject that reflects its alienation, while evading any substantive reckoning with the violator's identity or position.

It is the sensual sterility of white people—their inability to really *see* black people, to really *taste* the bread they break with others, to *touch* without violence—that ensures they remain trapped "in a history which they do not understand" (Baldwin 1998, 294). For Baldwin, who conceives of love as an embodied, erotic experience, this progressive loss of sensuality renders white Americans increasingly loveless creatures who misunderstand not only themselves but their history, nation, and fellow citizens. Thus, it is not just the psychological and historical disconnect, but the *senselessness* of racial innocence that makes it so enduring and insidious.

It is his emphasis on the sensual, embodied dimensions of love—and the consequences of sensual disconnect—that illuminates the distinctiveness of Baldwin's

thought. Indeed, Baldwin was hardly alone in his emphasis on love in promoting racial justice during the Civil Rights Era. As Christopher Lebron (2017, 99) argues, for both Baldwin and Martin Luther King Jr., “love was the key to democratic redemption.” Yet Baldwin exceeds not only King but also Howard Thurman, both of whom primarily link love’s political power to deliberative reasoning.

Like Baldwin, King (1967, 37) describes whiteness as a condition of lovelessness, arguing that white Americans “seek their goals through power devoid of love and conscience.” However, King frames lovelessness as a problem of cognition and judgment, rather than as a sensual or embodied disconnect. Racial justice necessitates learning to reconcile the demands of love with the exercise of power:

[P]ower without love is reckless and abusive and . . . love without power is sentimental and anemic. Power at its best is love implementing the demands of justice. Justice at its best is love correcting everything that stands against love. (King 1967, 37)

Like Arendt, King recognizes that love may collapse into antipolitical sentimentalism. Yet only love can guide the just exercise of power in a racialized democracy. Learning—and choosing—to reconcile love with power moves us toward reconciliation and forgiveness, eventually transforming “an enemy into a friend” (King 1963, 38). In tying love to the exercise of power, King describes a process of habituation in which one learns to *think* with love to *act* justly, and it is this cognitive transformation that moves us toward racial justice.

Howard Thurman, biblical in his approach, also argues that racial justice can only be achieved by learning to “think” with love, which is only possible when white and black Americans “descramble” how they see each other. Each group must learn to see and respect each other as “freed spirits”; to see each other as God does. Only then can they love (Thurman 1996, 110). Like King, love is primarily a cognitive process for Thurman, one that hinges on the subject’s capacity for rational deliberation with both himself and others. One’s capacity to love depends upon their cognitive orientation toward themselves and their fellow citizens—neither King, nor Thurman, alludes to love’s embodied sensuality. Yet as Baldwin shows, the trouble with “lovelessness” is not purely, or perhaps even primarily, psychological. It is not just white Americans’ thoughtlessness, or their inability to link the suffering of black Americans to their own unexamined lives and histories, but the sensual disconnect that arises from their fraudulent innocence. As Baldwin (1998, 312) argues in *The Fire Next Time*, it is ultimately this sensual disconnect that foments a state of

loneliness, a detachment from reality that annihilates self-trust, because “[t]he person who distrusts himself has no touchstone for reality—for this touchstone can be only oneself.” Where thinkers like King and Thurman distance themselves from the embodied experience of love by emphasizing the cognitively transformative experience of loving, Baldwin shows how the erotic, smelly, and uncertain dimensions of love are bound up with the possibility of personal transformation.

Although love connotes sensuality and intimacy for Baldwin, love also depends upon preserving the “in-between” that distinguishes and relates individuals. In calling upon those relatively conscious Americans to come together *like* lovers, Baldwin suggests that love enables citizens to critically examine the spaces between them, how they are constituted, and how they may sustain racial hierarchies. While those spaces ought to be foreclosed, Baldwin’s encounter with this loveless man demonstrates how love demands that we *preserve* space as much as we delimit it. Although love may entail an erasure of boundaries, it also enables us to recognize when we need distance from each other, to both foster relationships of interdependence *and* preserve the individuality that makes such relationships possible.

Diagnosing whiteness as a condition of lovelessness enables Baldwin to recognize white people’s sensual disconnect in ways that exceed criticism and move toward prescription. For Baldwin, the antidote to racial innocence is not just a historically situated self-understanding, or rational deliberation, but a restoration of the capacity to love, to be intimate without doing violence. Loving is an experience of both liberation and obligation, as well as self-disclosure and vulnerability. As Baldwin (1998, 341) argues in *The Fire Next Time*, it is these experiences that white Americans so desperately need, and yet have evaded:

All of us know whether or not we are able to admit it, that mirrors can only lie, that death by drowning is all that awaits one there. It is for this reason that love is so desperately sought and so cunningly avoided. Love takes off the masks that we fear we cannot live without and know we cannot live within.

It is this clarity of sight and feeling, of being at once bound and liberated, which makes love such a transformative mode of relationality for Baldwin. Love necessitates self-assessment, and that understanding is an ongoing, intersubjective project. Love prepares one to recognize the asymmetrical relationships of black understanding and white ignorance that sustain America’s racial nightmare. For Baldwin, if we truly desire change, not on the surface but in the depths of those souls, we must tend to this transformation with diligence, persistence, and a respect for the

lengthy, internal struggles of self-transformation. In this way, love prepares us for the struggles and obligations of democratic political life.

Black Love/Black Anger: Survival and Resistance

Although Baldwin primarily associates lovelessness with whiteness and racial innocence, he also identifies a kind of lovelessness among black people—the inability to love that arises from the self-destructive tendencies of hatred. In *Notes of a Native Son*, Baldwin (1998, 81, 84) derives from his father—who was consumed by an “exhausting and self-destructive” hatred—an “immutable law”: hatred destroys all men. Similarly, Baldwin recognizes the self-destructive tendencies of hatred in himself when he hurls a glass of water at a waitress upon being refused service. In that moment, Baldwin (1998, 72) recounts, “I saw nothing very clearly but I did see this: that my life, my *real* life, was in danger, and not from anything other people might do but from the hatred I carried in my own heart.” Contra Arendt, who maintains that “hatred and love belong together, and they are both destructive,” Baldwin maintains that only hatred is self-destructive, while love furnishes a mode of survival and resistance. Like Arendt, Baldwin (1998, 81) recognizes the proximity of love and hatred, life and death, yet he conceives of love as a technique of survival that enables black people to guard against the self-destructive tendencies of hatred.

In this reading, I depart from Grant Farred (2015, 289), who argues that “love, for Baldwin, always begins in responsibility to the Other.” Although love may involve a responsibility to the Other, it neither begins nor ends there. Reflecting in *Notes of a Native Son* on his experiences in church as a teenager, Baldwin (1998, 309–10) recounts the absence of that love: “I really mean that there was no love in the church. It was a mask for hatred and self-hatred and self-despair.” As a gay man, Baldwin (1998, 819) recognized the perverse evangelism that diagnosed his love for another man as a sickness. Baldwin was not only marginalized within the church but also found that the love he expressed toward his contemporaries within the Civil Rights Movement often went unreciprocated. In the same text that he professes to have once “lusted” for Baldwin’s writing, Eldridge Cleaver (1968, 124) reviles Baldwin’s sexuality, describing it as “a sickness, just as are baby-rape or wanting to become the head of General Motors.” Without overtly rejecting him, Martin Luther King Jr. maintained a calculated distance from Baldwin, whose sexuality he regarded as a political liability.

Brutalized by white supremacy, the church, and the toxic ideal of American masculinity, Baldwin (1998, 366) nonetheless maintains in *No Name in the Street* that love is, “[T]he key to life. Not merely the key to *my* life, but to

life itself.” Thus, love is always first a mode of self-affirmation and an act of resistance against the self-destructive hatred provoked by both white supremacy and heteropatriarchy. When Baldwin (1962, 8) implores his nephew in *The Fire Next Time* to “accept [white people] and accept them with love,” he is first positing love as a means for his nephew to safeguard against an inheritance that is otherwise all-consuming and fatal. This is what Eldridge Cleaver (1968, 124) misses when he argues, “There is in James Baldwin’s work the most grueling, agonizing, total hatred of the blacks, particularly of himself, and the most shameful, fanatical, fawning, sycophantic love of the whites.” Accusing Baldwin of “defending his first love—the white man,” Cleaver (1968, 125) overlooks that Baldwin’s decision to love white people is not an affirmation of their pathological innocence, but, rather, a technique of resistance in a nation that has historically proven to be either indifferent or antagonistic toward black peoples’ survival.

While Baldwin insists upon love in guarding against hatred, he also retains a central place for black anger in political life. For Baldwin, who claims in an interview to have never “been in despair about the world,” only “enraged by it,” this rage is an irreducible and inescapable effect of being black in America (Thorsen 1989):

[R]age cannot be hidden, it can only be dissembled. This dissembling deludes the thoughtless, and strengthens rage and adds, to rage, contempt. There are, no doubt, as many ways of coping with the resulting complex of tensions as there are black men in the world, but no black man can hope ever to be entirely liberated from this internal warfare—rage, dissembling, and contempt having inevitably accompanied his first realization of the power of white men. (Baldwin 1998, 121–22)

These tensions, which Baldwin first highlights in *Notes of a Native Son*, are inescapable, but can be negotiated. Managing the tensions between rage, dissembling, and contempt is a matter of (re)negotiating their relationships with a living history of racism, a process that Baldwin (1962, 81) describes in *The Fire Next Time* as, “. . . learning how to use it.” The term “use” suggests negotiating the tensions between three interrelated tasks: (1) reclaiming, revising, and preserving the memory of the nation’s racist foundations; (2) identifying and critiquing the institutional afterlives and outgrowths of that history; and (3) seeking to fundamentally transform those foundations to collectively build something new.

It is the inescapability and usefulness of anger that David Richards misses in his reading of Baldwin, and which leads him to overestimate love’s liberatory capacities. For Richards (2014, 159), loving and being loved by a white man was wholly regenerative—it “released

Baldwin from fear and anger he had experienced in America, an uncontrollable rage that he had come to fear in himself.” Yet this obfuscates Baldwin’s consistent blend of hopefulness and pessimism toward the world, as well as his ambivalence toward love—two recurrent themes throughout his essays. Rather than try to escape his anger, as Richards suggests, I argue that Baldwin frames anger in terms of its “usefulness,” reimagining its inescapability as a “power potential,” as a force that recognizes and affirms one’s indignation, suffering, and contempt while transforming those experiences “into an energy that isn’t self-destructive or self-limiting” (Bromell 2013, 30). Insofar as anger can be “accurately used,” it becomes a force uniquely suited for naming, confronting, and demanding accountability for white complicity in America’s racial nightmare. To that end, Baldwin’s (1998, 294) account of anger helps to explain white discomfort toward black rage, which threatens to undo the ways that black people still function “in the white man’s world as a fixed star, as an immovable pillar.” Thus, while Baldwin legitimates black anger, he demands more generative forms of action in enacting that rage.

Accepting that love is indispensable and anger is inescapable, Baldwin treats them as complementary political emotions. Love that suppresses or denies anger is shallow and inauthentic, while anger that makes no recourse to love becomes self-destructive and impotent. Where “rage and sorrow [sit] in the darkness” as they did in Baldwin’s church, love not only collapses into vacuous sentimentality, it often also produces “hatred and self-hatred and self-despair” (Baldwin 1998, 311, 309). For Baldwin (1998, 341), love, “in the tough and universal sense of quest and daring and growth,” reserves an important space for black Americans to express anger at the lost promise that so many embody in abdicating responsibility for the world. Thus, love is not coequal with happiness, but rather a way of being and acting in the world that challenges us to exceed ourselves and demand that others do the same.

To that end, Baldwin speaks of love in ways that reconcile compulsion and responsibility. For Baldwin, love is always bound up with obligations and demands, which for Arendt foreclose the possibility of political engagement. Put another way, compulsion is antithetical to the exhilarating, worldly spirit of public life. Yet this account of love, with its emphasis on demands and obligations, reveals the limitations of Arendt’s politics, which holds that citizens ought to self-exclude from politics on the basis of our individual interests. Arendt was unable to recognize the extent to which black Americans are politicized and forced to act politically by virtue of their birth. Baldwin, aware of this fact, conceives of love as both a mode of self-affirmative survival and resistance: it enables him to recognize the precarity and value of his life while resisting a hatred that—while justified—yields

only self-destructive impotence. Instead, love obliges both a responsibility to oneself—to the project of personal transformation—and a responsibility to the world, to think outside one’s limited self-interest. In tying his account of love to the language of obligations and demands, Baldwin orients us toward a worldly responsibility that Arendt worries love makes us indifferent toward. Love enables each of us to confront and seize upon the lost but perhaps still reparable promise of American democracy (Baldwin 1998, 221).

Love and the Lost Promise of American Democracy

Baldwin’s emphasis on responsibility and obligation reveals that love inaugurates the possibility of not only personal but also material and structural transformation. It is not just our psychological and embodied transformation at stake but the very possibility of freedom, which, for Baldwin, is both liberating and binding. We are liberated by the experience of constraint—in the physical constraint of our proximity to others, and the emotional constraint of our obligations to those around us. For Baldwin (1998, 366), as he emphasizes in *No Name in the Street*, loving another person alters our perception of and relationship to the world in ways that open us to the possibility of change:

The world changes then, and it changes forever. Because you love one human being, you see everyone else differently than you saw them before—perhaps I only mean to say that you begin to *see*—and you are both stronger and more vulnerable, both free and bound. Free, paradoxically, because, now, you have a home—your lover’s arms. And bound: to that mystery, precisely, a bondage which liberates you into something of the glory and suffering of the world.

How might we extend this experience of liberation and bondage to Baldwin’s call to act *like* lovers? Like his account of lovelessness, Baldwin begins from the sensual and embodied—it is the physical intimacy, that sense of place each of us finds in another’s arms, that liberates us. This liberation is constituted through both physical restraint—being held by one’s lover—and the emotional obligation of that intimacy, which awakens us to “the glory and suffering of the world,” to the possibilities and perils that only arise from the vulnerability that love engenders (Baldwin 1998, 366). Indeed, this vulnerability is inescapable—the possibility of abandonment, loss, and betrayal are all endemic to love. Yet it is only that vulnerability, that sense of bondage, which avails love’s liberatory capacities to us.

This is precisely the sense of vulnerability and strength, liberty and bondage, which Baldwin seeks to engender when he calls upon the relatively conscious to come

together *like* lovers. For Baldwin, our liberation—the experience of freedom—arises from our obligations, the boundedness that comes with loving another person. From that sense of intimacy and obligation, each of us begins to really see—love bestows a sight that is attuned to the wondrous possibilities of the world, as well as the suffering of its inhabitants. Thus, as we learn to see the world through our obligations to others, the world changes because we see it from outside our own limited self-interest. We see all of the possibilities available to us—in both their glory and brutality—and we have the opportunity to knowingly and freely choose what we want for ourselves and others. Our sight becomes less partial—we are liberated from the self-delusions of racial innocence or the self-destructive tendencies of hatred. In this way, love prepares us for the struggles and obligations of democratic political life. As Eric Gregory (2010, 216) argues, love compels us to examine and question the world; it is *not* “... rendered dumb when confronted with the challenges of principled political judgment.” For Baldwin (1998, 347), it is this clarity of sight and this certainty of feeling that might enable us to fully liberate ourselves, to “end the racial nightmare, and achieve our country, and change the history of the world.” Thus, to act *like* lovers inaugurates the possibility of freedom, and freedom, like love, is possible only in the company of others.

However, in transforming our perception of the world, love reveals the need for not only personal but structural transformation. Indeed, the project of self-transformation would mean little without creating the material conditions to ensure that new self could flourish. Love in the “tough and universal sense of quest and daring and growth,” requires not only a new way of seeing the world but durable changes to the world itself (Baldwin 1998, 341). For Baldwin, the precise depth and scope of these changes—that is, the reconstitution of American democracy—is a question that we can only answer collectively as democratic citizens (Turner 2017, 311). Yet we can still begin to address the need for structural change—and love’s role in producing that change—by engaging Baldwin’s critique of property. For Baldwin, the psychological and embodied project of self-transformation, which furnishes a view of the world attuned to the well-being of others, enables us to condemn the exploitative logic of capitalist social relations and imagine new modes of relationality. Recognizing that love is central to the struggle for black liberation, and that capitalism in its current form is contingent on the continued oppression of black Americans, love, for Baldwin, turns back onto a radical critique of property.

In “Freaks and the American Ideal of Manhood,” Baldwin (1998, 816) shows how in the course of the Industrial Revolution, property changed such that, “a man was reduced not merely to a thing but to a thing the

value of which was determined, absolutely, by that thing’s commercial value.” Not only could humans become chattel, but their value as property now purported to capture their worth and purpose. It was this “vast and deep and sinister” change that justified African slavery and Native genocide, that laid the groundwork for the Constitution to enact the Three-Fifths Clause (Baldwin 1998, 815–16). Where liberals like Locke uphold the triumvirate of life, liberty, and property as the solution to the challenges of human plurality, Baldwin shows how, in practice, property exists to further white interests. Enlightenment ideals, which promised universal human dignity and liberation, in practice only ensured the liberty of the few to subjugate the many. Property provided both the logic and mechanism for enslavement, expropriation, and colonization, ensuring that life and liberty would remain illusory or incomplete.

Troubled by the primacy that liberals afford property, which subverts human flourishing and freedom to the accumulation of things, Baldwin fractures the “holy triumvirate” of life, liberty, and property (Turner 2017, 310). As Turner (2017, 314) argues, Baldwin’s aim is not to abolish property, but to reimagine it “as a contingent and malleable political institution rather than a prepolitical right.” In denaturalizing and politicizing property, Baldwin opens up new opportunities for democratic reconstitution, wherein the liberty and flourishing of others supersede our claims to the material world. Property cannot exist to justify exclusion and subjugation—instead, property is only legitimate insofar as it supports liberation and flourishing. This level of reconstitution requires that we abdicate any promise of security, surrendering ourselves to transforming the self and society, because, as Baldwin (1998, 209) argues in *Nobody Knows My Name*, “real change implies the breakup of the world as one has always known it, the loss of all that gave one an identity, the end of safety.”

Love requires we abdicate not only the promise of material safety but also the ontological safety of uncontested principles like property. This arises from Baldwin’s deep ambivalence toward the gap between principle and practice. As Lawrie Balfour (2001, 17) argues, this ambivalence is indispensable to understanding Baldwin’s political thought: “The dual conviction that principles cannot be conceived or elaborated apart from experiences and that those experiences repeatedly undermine the possibility that the principle will be realized lends an indispensable ambivalence to Baldwin’s writing.” Troubled by the gap between the aspirations of property as a universal principle and its disastrous implementation, Baldwin instead sustains a dialogue between principle and practice in which principles are neither constantly revised, nor immutable.

If the reconstitution of property, and along with it, the transformation of ourselves and society requires that we

abdicate the promises of safety, then love furnishes us with the techniques for navigating a world of possibility and uncertainty. Love is the antithesis of liberal property in Baldwin's political thought: where property is predicated on relationships of privacy, exclusion, and inequality, love compels us to foster equality and distinction in place of capitalist orders. Where property urges us to form relationships of exploitation, to measure another's worth against their commercial value, love enables us to form bonds of mutual regard by seeing the world from outside our own limited self-interest. Where property leads us to evaluate the worth of human bonds according to a calculus of private advantage, love requires that we invest fairly and freely in others to free ourselves.

If love demands investing freely in others, then love also requires a less transactional, more democratic concept of reciprocity. Indeed, as Baldwin (1998, 365) questions in *No Name in the Street*, "[W]ho knows how much one is loved, by whom, or what that love may be called on to do?" In this respect, Arendt is correct: to the extent that we love freely, love *does* become a stranger. Love must be sent into the world with little concern for reciprocity, or the times and places in which it returns. This is precisely Baldwin's (1998, 366) aim in describing the liberatory dimensions of love as a "mystery." Unlike our transactional approach to property, we must dare to accept that love will often be given and received in unequal parts. In this respect, love is a profoundly anticapitalist experience of uncertainty and self-overcoming. Love, like action, requires that we appear in the world and act on behalf of it, rather than our own limited self-interests.

To be sure, love is not unconcerned with reciprocity—we could hardly call an endlessly unidirectional relationship loving, because, as Lebron (2017, 110) argues, "When we love, we set the standards by which the other party must abide for our love to be ongoing." Indeed, healthy, loving relationships require such boundaries. Yet how deep can those demands go—what degree or kind of control can they exert? As the preceding discussion of reciprocity suggests, Baldwin views love as a nonsovereign experience of liberation and bondage. When we love somebody, do we get to choose how they love us back? This presupposes a kind of sovereignty that love demands we abnegate. If, as Lebron (2017, 99) argues, love entails "a willingness to reveal one's own vulnerabilities and treat others' vulnerabilities with kindness and a large heart," then perhaps love also compels us to relinquish most aspirations of control. Love creates the conditions for structural transformation by enabling white Americans to sacrifice the promise of safety that was never their rightful inheritance.

In this way, love not only compels us to give up things for others but provides a framework for understanding *how* and *why* we ought to make those choices. As George

Shulman (2008, 140) argues, Baldwin conceives of love as a sensual coming together, "an idiom of 'love' as eros and not only agape," implying a moment of intimacy and dissolution of boundaries between two subjects. Love is inherently risky—always an act of self-disclosure and an admission of vulnerability. Thus, while love cannot resolve the uncertainties or anxiety that accompany personal and social transformation, it does enable us to negotiate these tensions. These experiences of vulnerability and uncertainty name a transformative mode of being and acting "that moves an individual or collective subject not from ignorance to knowledge but from innocence to acknowledgement . . . from sterile repetition into the unknown" (Shulman 2008, 137). In moving from innocence to acknowledgment, in abdicating the promise of safety, love cannot guarantee warmth or certainty, as Arendt suggests, but it does enable us to honestly consider questions like the one Baldwin (1998, 733) poses in "Report from Occupied Territory," when he asks, "Are their profits more important than the health of our children?" Love prepares white Americans to accept their responsibility for America's racial nightmare, and to sacrifice privileges that were never their rightful inheritance.

Conclusion

In the preceding sections, I have shown how love inaugurates the possibility of both personal and structural transformation. Contra Arendt, who argues that love is antipolitical because it negates plurality, Baldwin speaks of love in ways that confirm, rather than subvert, the political significance of our differences. For both thinkers, what is at stake in debating love's politics is the significance of our shared humanity, that feature that both distinguishes and relates us. Like Arendt, Baldwin maintains that each human life is miraculous. While both seek to preserve the miraculousness of human individuality, Baldwin (1998, 357) recognizes in *No Name in the Street* that one must treat others "as the miracles they are, while trying to protect oneself against the disasters they've become." Unlike Arendt, who dispenses with love as antipolitical, Baldwin utilizes the concept of acting *like* lovers to navigate the fraught political tension between criticizing what we have become, while also maintaining that each of us can change for the better. This is what enables Baldwin to express both unconditional love and also lovingly demand that we change or be changed. For Baldwin, who claims, "I don't think I'm in despair, I can't afford despair . . . You can't tell the children there's no hope," love sustains that hope by renewing our capacity to recognize the significance of our shared humanity and our mutual obligations as democratic citizens (Thorsen 1989).

For black Americans, the stakes of that recognition are grave. When Darren Wilson described Michael Brown as “a demon, that’s how angry he looked,” the murder of an eighteen-year-old boy became an act of self-preservation against an otherworldly force (*State of Missouri v. Darren Wilson* 2014, 225). These dehumanizing stereotypes, which legitimate and sustain state-sanctioned violence, ensure that white Americans will continue to evade the complexity of black Americans like Brown, as well as the shared humanity that both distinguishes and relates them. Love, on the contrary, forces us to recognize the complexity of the world, and the significance of human plurality. Confronted with the humanity of their fellow citizens, white Americans will struggle to evade their own fictitious innocence and the necessity of personal transformation, as well as the need to transform the structural conditions that sustain the dehumanization of black Americans.

In charting this underexplored point of contact between these two thinkers, I have sought to complicate Arendt’s critique of love, while shedding new light on Baldwin’s political thought. Love is a touchstone for Baldwin, and it structures other perennial concepts in his works, including racial innocence. Indeed, it is the concept of lovelessness, which I delineate in Baldwin’s political thought, that bridges the psychological and embodied dimensions of racial innocence. Likewise, rather than dismiss Arendt’s critique of love as symptomatic of her troubled racial politics, I have sought to explicate the nuance of her concerns while showing how they have less bearing on Baldwin’s work than we might initially believe. Finally, rather than overstate love’s political import, which I take to be limited, I have sought to give love pragmatic consideration as a normative concept and political potential. Indeed, if “love is a growing up,” it suggests a certain inevitability to the whole affair. It suggests that someday we must confront that battle, that war that “does not begin and end the way we seem to think it does,” but that nonetheless might enable us to begin reclaiming the lost promise of American democracy.

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Notes

1. Not all modes of reproduction take place between lovers, nor are all modes of intimate love reproductive. Moreover, while Arendt is almost surely referring to heteronormative reproduction, she does not reference the act in ways that preclude us from queering her analysis.
2. Arendt had already tempered her criticism of black parents as “parvenu” in a response to Ralph Ellison, who argued that Arendt misunderstood “the idea of sacrifice” that was endemic to the black experience (Penn Warren 1964). Writing to Ellison, Arendt withdrew her critique and acknowledged her error in judgment: “It is precisely this ideal of sacrifice which I didn’t understand” (Posnock 2005, 201).
3. Kathryn Gines (2014), who offers one of the most comprehensive critiques of Arendt on race, takes this “explicit connection between the Negro and the pariah” as a move in the right direction, albeit with major pitfalls. Written three years after her “Reflections on Little Rock,” Arendt’s invocation of the “pariah” signals a shift from her assessment of black parents as “social parvenu.” Yet there are also limitations to Arendt equating the Jewish experience with the oppression of black Americans. Her invocation of “all oppressed peoples” flattens the historical specificity of each group’s subjugation, leading her to misunderstand Baldwin’s argument.

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