



Developing a Critical Conceptualization of Love in Our Social Justice Work



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Within social justice and movement building work, love is frequently mentioned but rarely defined or operationalized. In this three-part series on the [Critical Theory of Love](#) framework, author Durrelle Brooks aims to fill the gap. By exploring the social function of love, the framework seeks to reclaim love as a radical and transformative force, replacing an uncritical love that perpetuates White supremacy, racism, and other forms of oppression. The CToL framework is presented as a means to disrupt these oppressive dynamics and fuel collective healing and movements for social justice.

Often, people talk about the importance of love in our social justice and movement building work, but very few define and operationalize it. In *All About Love*, bell hooks writes, "Definitions are vital starting points for the imagination. What we cannot imagine cannot come into being. A good definition marks our starting point and lets us know where we want to end up."

In this three-part series of articles, I offer an operational definition of love that centers social justice as a starting point, and I articulate a Critical Theory of Love (CToL) framework as a guide to strengthening our capacity to love in ways that produce justice.

Love can be radical and transformative, but without an adequate understanding of its social function, an empowering love is displaced by an uncritical love—a form that operates as a mechanism to perpetuate White supremacy, racism, and other forms of oppression. But with the CToL framework, uncritical love and its oppressive dynamics can be disrupted, and we, as people, peers, and practitioners, can think more deeply about our individual and collective healing and

wellbeing.

What Is Love?

As an interdisciplinary social scientist and social justice practitioner, I have been plagued by the seemingly simple question: What is love?

For the last 20 years, I have sought to understand love not merely in the personal context but in the broader social and political context, to understand its social function, and to then build a critical theory of love that would not crumble under the weight of systemic oppression.

Out of desperation, I pursued the question of love relentlessly because I understood what it meant to exist in a world that reminded me, and people like me, every single day that we were unlovable. We were too fat, too poor, too Black (or not Black enough), and too gay. I came of age in inner-city Baltimore during the height of the AIDS epidemic, where the stigma around homosexuality was so thick it was suffocating. I lived during a time when my Black family had to be escorted out of historically White Baltimore neighborhoods or face the threat of White mobs. I remember reporting to my high school leadership that I was spat at and shoved into the bathroom wall because of my sexual orientation—no one acted on my behalf.

I share these examples not as an act of self-indulgence, but to practice what standpoint feminist theorists like [Patricia Hill Collins](#) would suggest—that knowledge is not only generated from our specific social location and historical context but also how knowledge from that position can either maintain or change unjust systems of power. It is because of what I have experienced within my specific social location, not in spite of it, that I can leverage to shift and change unjust systems of power.

Thus, the central questions are: What is love to the oppressed? What is it to those who have been historically marginalized and socially maligned?

In my work, I have found that love is political because it uses racialized and other social hierarchies to evaluate the worth of our contributions, knowledge, lived experiences, and our literal lives. It is political because it ascribes and confers social value, designates who matters and who is disposable, structures and governs desire and desirability, establishes the conditions of worthiness, and determines to what degree someone or something is willing to act on your behalf.

In this way, I enter the work of love from a specific intersectional position as a direct result of living with multiple marginalized identities that revealed just how vacant the everyday construction of love actually is in terms of generating justice.

Dr. King spoke of this acutely when he penned, “What is needed is a realization that power without love is reckless and abusive and that love without power is sentimental and anemic. Power at its best is love implementing the demands of justice.”¹

What Is a Critical Theory of Love?

I created a CTOL framework as an invitation for us to reimagine, reclaim, and reconceptualize the idea of love itself with an anti-oppressive power analysis. I use “critical” as author Ben Agger suggests in *Critical Social Theories* to “unveil the hidden ideologies in the everyday.”²

To build the framework, I first had to understand the social function of love. I had to understand love not merely as a feeling but as a social phenomenon that shapes and informs our worldviews and governs our behaviors. Additionally, by exposing the hidden ideologies, I could better see and analyze power dynamics and the ways that love is used to reinforce and justify social hierarchies related to race, gender, sexuality, and class, to name a few.

“Power without love is reckless and

For example: What is the social benefit of making entire groups of Black people, fat people, poor people, differently-abled

abusive and...love without power is sentimental and anemic.”

people, and queer people believe that they are inherently unlovable? CToL asks us to examine how we have been socialized to love some people more than others, to hold some in high regard, and to see others as disposable. It asks us to

interrogate what we have learned about love from the intersections of our social identities (that is, race, gender, sexuality, and class, among other identifiers), especially from our places of social marginalization.

When we do not engage love as a social phenomenon and with an anti-oppressive analysis, we fail to see it in a political context. We fail to see the connections between love and oppression. We fail to see that the everyday construction of love is anemic and an intentional effort to obscure the fact that it is a necessary mechanism for dehumanization.

Dehumanization is not an abstract concept. It is an outcome of a methodical and intentional abuse of power that leverages systems, processes, and institutional practices to degrade us and deny us dignity in the service of maintaining current social hierarchies. It relies on the mass production of [negative and hateful myths](#) and [stereotypes](#) about groups of people to maintain and sustain the social belief that some people are inherently superior (usually the dominant group) and others are inferior (usually the subordinated group).

Additionally, depriving us of a language to challenge violent and destructive versions of “love” that we were socialized to believe was the best we could expect diminishes our capacity to recognize when those versions fail to provide healing and restoration. There are so many people walking around deeply wounded, betrayed, and victimized by the people who promised to love them the most.

With these kinds of wounds, we can easily slip into self-blame and guilt or quickly blame others. The CToL framework invites us to go beyond the individual level—*I did not love or experience love from others in ways I would have liked*—and examine the role systems play in creating the conditions for that experience.

When we do not commit the time and energy to develop a CToL, we miss an opportunity to help ourselves and others see through the thinly veiled guise of violence and control that frequently masquerades as “love.” We also miss an opportunity to hold systems accountable for producing inhospitable conditions that make loving ourselves and each other difficult, especially across lines of difference.

Love in Social Justice and Movement Building Work

Developing a Critical Theory of Love in our social justice and movement building work is an act of resistance to dehumanization. It’s an intervention, a way to pull back the covers on this anemic everyday notion of love. It recognizes that love is required for building a just world that works for our individual and collective good. It recognizes that love is, indeed, political.

If love is going to be the transformative intervention that we need, it is not only going to have to grapple with power but also help us heal. To that end, the purpose of critical love at the highest level is the mutual co-construction of our full personhood.

With that as the purpose, we need a [new definition of love](#) as “the capacity, will, and courage to nourish and affirm oneself, another, and community toward unapologetic wholeness and completeness.” That means that as a practice, we build our own capacity to love and then help others to do the same on *their* terms, not ours.

It also means that I cannot operate from a color-blind stance. In order to co-create interventions that resist erasure and support healing, I must deeply understand the contextual forces working to silence my voice and prevent me from being unapologetically myself. In this way, CToL invites us to understand love as a culturally and socially responsive intervention for our times.

This world needs to be taught how to love us, and we need to reconceptualize love to expose the patterns of domination and control that we have been socialized into. Otherwise, we will likely reify the same oppressive dynamics in our work in the name of “love” or “social progress.”

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CToL provides a framework that helps us resist erasure and dehumanization and encourages us to understand that love must also facilitate our own healing, resourcing our full realization of our individual and collective voice. If love is going to be transformative, we will have to make it so.

Notes

1. Martin Luther King, Jr., *Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?* (Harper & Row, 1967).
2. Ben Agger, *Critical Social Theories* (Paradigm Publishers, 2006), 81.

About the author



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