



LOVE

Heather Davis

IN A TOWN HALL MEETING IN SEATTLE THAT TOOK place shortly after the 2014 Ferguson uprisings, Cornell West described Black Lives Matter and its future challenges in the following way: “These folks start channeling all of this rage in a way that is headed towards justice rather than killing each other. . . . But the challenge is going to be can we pass on to the younger generation the expression of that rage . . . through love and justice rather than hatred and revenge?” (West 2014). The pairing of love and justice in West’s comments is part of a long tradition with roots in Christian theology. It continues to find expression in social movements today.

The slogan “Black Lives Matter” itself came from a sentiment of love (Kurwa 2014). It started as a conversation on Facebook between Alicia Garza and Patrisse Cullors. Garza thought it was extremely troubling that people were not surprised when George Zimmerman was found innocent after murdering Trayvon Martin, an unarmed Black teenager. Garza wrote, “Black people, I love you, I love us, we got us and our lives matter” (Kurwa 2014). Her friend turned the sentiment into the hash tag #blacklivesmatter and connected it to a burgeoning movement that would grow even stronger after the police killings of Eric Garner and Michael Brown (Kurwa 2014). The insistence on “love” in the movement’s first enunciations is fundamental to cultivating both solidarity and self worth, which are consistently undermined by white supremacist culture. Here, “love” operates not solely as an affirmation but also as an indictment of racism. The call to love is thus necessarily a call for self-organizing and racial justice.

As noted in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, “love” has been used in English to describe affection and attachment since at least the eighth century, with etymological roots in Old Frisian, Old Saxon, Old High German, and Gothic. Love itself has certainly been part of human consciousness long before this. Organizing through calls of love also has a long history—especially in movements that adhere to nonviolent direct action, like the Civil Rights Movement. Here, “love” and “justice” are twinned through the imperative to “love thy neighbor as thyself.” According to the Book of Mark, “there is none other commandment greater than these” (Mark 12:31). This imperative has influenced contemporary social movements through traditions like nonviolent resistance and liberation theology. The two most prominent examples of nonviolent direct action from the twentieth century are the Quit India movement led by Mahatma Gandhi and the Civil Rights Movement in the United States. Both frequently invoked “love” as a guiding principle and force for change.

Early on, Gandhi was influenced by “A Letter to a Hindu,” which Leo Tolstoy published in the *Free Hindustan*. In it he argued that all of the major religions were united through the principle of

love, which represented the highest form of morality. For Tolstoy, this did not mean that people should be subservient; on the contrary, the principle of love compelled opposition to all forms of violence and—in the case of colonial India—the overthrow of English rule. “Love is the only way to rescue humanity from all ills,” Tolstoy wrote, “and in it you too have the only method of saving your people from enslavement” (Tolstoy n.d.). Gandhi adopted this principle and subsequently developed his understanding of nonviolent direct action through reference to “*satya*” (truth) and “*ahimsa*” (“action based on the refusal to do harm”), which he drew from Hinduism (Bondurant 1971, 23). This principle—that love can overcome oppression—was put to work on a grand scale and contributed to the overthrow of British colonial rule.

Drawing on Baptist theology, Martin Luther King Jr. developed a similar conception of love as resistance. He understood the destructiveness of hate and the transformative potential of loving one’s neighbor even while actively working to resist violent actions. According to King, hate distorted the personality of the person who hates. In contrast, love was radical, redemptive, and transformative. In a recently discovered 1964 address, “Speech on Civil Rights, Segregation, and Apartheid South Africa,” King insisted that “love can be a powerful force for social change”:

I’m not talking about a weak love, I’m not talking about emotional bosh here. I’m not talking about some sentimental quality. . . . It would be nonsense to urge oppressed people to love their violent oppressors in an affectionate sense and I have never advised that. . . . Love is understanding, creative, redemptive goodwill for all men. Theologians talk about this kind of love with the Greek word *agape*, which is a sort of overflowing love that seeks nothing in return. And when one develops this, you rise to the position of being able to love the person who does the evil deed, while hating the deed that the person does. . . . I believe firmly that it is through this kind of powerful

nonviolent action, this kind of love that organizes itself into mass action, that we will be able to transform the jangling discords of our nation and the world into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood. (King 1964b)

King similarly asserted the connection between love and social transformation during his 1964 Nobel Peace Prize address: “Negroes of the United States, following the people of India, have demonstrated that nonviolence is not sterile passivity, but a powerful moral force which makes for social transformation. . . . If [peace] is to be achieved, man must evolve for all human conflict a method which rejects revenge, aggression and retaliation. The foundation of such a method is love” (King 1964a). In this way, “love” became a fundamental principle of the Civil Rights Movement, and the churches became important sites for organizing people on this basis. Identification with love’s radical promise continues today and can be seen in social movements like Black Lives Matter. West made this connection explicit while speaking at the Seattle town-hall meeting mentioned above: “Love is subversive; it’s revolutionary because when you really love folk, especially when you really love poor and working people, you hate the fact that they are being treated unjustly. You loathe the fact that they are being treated unfairly and if you don’t do something then the rocks are going to cry out. That’s the fire in the bones that you get in Jeremiah and Hebrew scripture” (West 2014). In this Christian formulation, people are called to action and to achieve social justice through their love for others.

But despite the strong associations of love with nonviolent direct action, other revolutionary leaders have recognized the importance of love as a mobilizing principle while remaining open to violent tactics. In his “Socialism and Man in Cuba,” Che Guevara makes this explicit by asserting (“at the risk of seeming ridiculous,” no less) that “the true revolutionary is guided by great feelings of love.” In fact, he thought, “it is impossible to think of a genuine revolutionary lacking this quality” (Guevara 1968). This sentiment, with its seemingly contradictory impulses, would later be expressed by

liberation theologian Oscar Romero in the midst of El Salvador's armed struggle. In opposition to the movement's detractors, Romero insisted that "the violence we preach is . . . the violence of love" (AK Thompson 2014). Here, "love" is understood as political transformation and upheaval—not unlike the personal experience of falling in love, where the boundaries between self and other dissolve in a feeling that compels people to act beyond themselves. In this iteration, violence and love are not antithetical. Instead they work in tandem toward the larger goal of social revolution.

In a similar fashion, the notion of "brotherly love" (as in the Greek "*philia*") has also been a powerful organizing tool. Poland's Committee for Workers' Defense (KOR) illustrated the power of friendship to transcend and transform the political by bringing politics itself into contact with people's most intimate being. As researcher Nina Witoszek writes, politics in Poland from 1976 to 1978 was conducted "via unpolitical means: a bohemian community sharing things, money, food; a 'warm circle' which provided a sense of security and an awareness that 'you can risk everything because there will always be people who love you, who will help you and who will be with you to the end'" (Witoszek 2007, 106). This sense of solidarity between friends is thus presented as being essential to any kind of meaningful change. However, it is not without its risks. Although the idea that we are "in it together" can bond people and create the necessary emotional and physical structures to keep fighting, this same love can become a tool of social coercion capable of shutting down dissent within radical communities. Recalling a conference of NGO workers, Yasmin Nair describes how "it was expected that we would throw our lives out there and reveal our vulnerabilities. To justify all this, the word 'love' was thrown around a lot: we were not only expected to love our work—and what that meant for those whose work was unpaid or underpaid was quite unclear—but to love each other, to believe that we were all in the struggle together" (Nair 2011). Love, as Nair's account makes clear, can be marshaled as a semantic tool to quell dissent or obscure structural problems (especially concerning the organization and division of labor) within activist communities.

Political theorist Michael Hardt has recently considered how love can appear both as an expression of solidarity and as a force of transformation. By his account, love is a useful metaphor for revolution since it provides a framework to think about duration within transformation. Everyday experiences of love, ones that create relations of responsibility and radical change, parallel the need for forms of revolutionary action that are simultaneously transformative and ongoing. Hardt writes, "On the one hand, a political love must be a revolutionary force that radically breaks with the structures of the social life we know, overthrowing its norms and institutions. On the other hand, it must provide mechanisms of lasting association and . . . create enduring institutions" (2012, 6). For this to work, he offers two different concepts. One is the idea of "composition," which denotes a body composed of smaller parts that interact with other bodies. This happens both at the level of the individual and at the level of society, encouraging experimental configurations while not insisting on unity. The second concept is that of "ritual." Through ritual, people continually return to the things or people they love. It is a means of creating stability and repetition, and of bringing habit into our lives. Far from being mere repetition, this understanding of ritual offers a way of thinking about political structures as a source of constant revitalization. As a result, we can commit ourselves again and again while recognizing that each return is new. For Hardt, this model amounts to a form of revolutionary institution-making arising from the need to create stable structures for enduring change. We need places from which we might gain strength without those places becoming fixed or dogmatic.

Love is not just a useful metaphor for thinking through revolutionary transformation. It is also the site at which the personal connects with the political—as can be seen in the "free love" movement, which developed in the mid-nineteenth century. This movement argued that questions regarding love, sex, and partnership should be decided by individuals and not by the church or state. Connected to first-wave feminist politics, free love practitioners advocated women's bodily and reproductive autonomy

and showed how these rights were often foreclosed by marriage. Victoria Woodhull, the first woman to run for the US presidency, proclaimed her adherence to free love in 1871 when she wrote: "Yes, I am a Free Lover. I have an inalienable, constitutional and natural right to love whom I may, to love as long or as short a period as I can; to change that love every day if I please, and with that right neither you nor any law you can frame have any right to interfere."

Free love also had close associations with anarchism and found a venue in publications like *Lucifer, the Light Bearer*, which addressed matters concerning birth control, women's suffrage, and other topics. Emma Goldman (1932) also famously championed free love and reproductive rights and assisted with abortions. Like other anarchists, she argued that liberation could not be achieved without addressing issues of sexuality and the questions of women's equality (Goldman 1969, 227–39). Noting a connection between sexual and racial slavery and developing an interracial ethic through jazz and poetry, currents within the free love movement also forged alliances with abolitionists (Buhle 1998, 243). The movement also incorporated the insights and commitments of the early gay rights movement into its analysis through the writings of Edward Carpenter. These included a commitment to sex radicalism in the interest of overthrowing patriarchy and "the authoritarianism of heterosexual domination" as well as alignment with the "widespread movements to decriminalize homosexual activity" (Buhle 1998, 244). These attempts to redefine sexuality outside of the regulative norms of church and state anticipated the subsequent rise of LGBTIQ and polyamorous communities. Among other things, these projects attempt to re-invent sexual and intimate relations by allowing for ambiguity, incommensurability, and openness in order to cultivate a form of politics that refuses patriarchal heteronormativity.

Love is central to contemporary social justice projects as a guiding principle, a metaphor, and a practice. Love of the world and for others compels us to act. Love as attachment has—through the efforts of queer radicals—transformed notions of family, community, and intimacy. Through nonviolent direct action and civil rights, love has also been a means of structuring

our resistance. However, despite its power as a tool of resistance, love's invocation has not always been benign. Because it necessarily blurs the distinctions between the personal and political, love can be used for social coercion on intimate and national scales; consider the phrase "for the love of one's country." Indeed, it is often for love of family, friends, children, and others that we find ourselves in conflict with our own principles. Radicals must therefore cultivate love for and through social justice work while resisting its use as a tool of manipulation. For this reason, love's political promise must constantly be rediscovered.

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