

A Freedom That is Close to Love

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In her highly original, beautifully crafted, and eloquently argued paper, Addyson Frattura brilliantly addresses the questions of where love can exist and what it is for, by exploring the idea of expulsion, whether from school, society, or the world. Specifically, when schools call for greater diversity and inclusion, Frattura wants to know who is doing the loving? Is it the predominantly white educational institutions who love their racialized and disabled students, as Hannah Arendt might have us believe? Or is it the racialized and disabled students who seek to love those who have traditionally expelled, suspended, excluded, and punished them? And, if it is the latter, what is the character of such love? Frattura draws upon the writings of James Baldwin for an explanation of why it is the latter, arguing that “love must not be ignorant to the particular and existential concern of expulsion in regard to race” because “[d]iversity and inclusion are not the same as justice.”¹

Frattura’s defense of Baldwin’s conception of love is executed in three steps. First, she distinguishes Arendt’s conception of apolitical love from Baldwin’s conception of political love by carefully analyzing how they each spoke and wrote about love, including a correspondence between them in 1962. Frattura characterizes Arendt’s conception of love as apolitical: it is reserved for the private sphere; it is something we feel for friends and not peoples, and it is what motivates us to remove children from the world so we can educate them for the renewal of it. Frattura characterizes Baldwin’s conception of love as political for reasons I go into below. With the second step, Frattura brings the two conceptions into dialogue, all the while highlighting the role of race and racism in Baldwin’s political conception of love. In the third and final step, Frattura demonstrates how Arendt’s apolitical or conception of love contributes to her flawed understanding of desegregation and her misplaced opposition to Baldwin’s gospel of love. Frattura concludes with a defense of Baldwin’s conception of love as “both personal and private as well as worldly insofar as it contends with race

and one's racialized experience in the world."

I have no argument with Frattura's masterful defense of Baldwin's political conception of love, but in prefacing my engagement with it, I wish to offer some hermeneutical considerations about her characterization of Arendt's conception of love as apolitical. These hermeneutical considerations are in service of the suggestion that Arendt's conception of love is more worldly than Frattura, and others, represent it as being, in my view, Arendt's acknowledged failing where racism in the United States is concerned is related to her ignorance of structural racism and systemic oppression. The hermeneutical points address Frattura's interpretation of Arendt's correspondence with Gershom Scholem, "Crisis in Education," and Arendt's correspondence with Baldwin, respectively.

When Arendt writes to Scholem that she had never loved a people or a collective, she places the word "love" in inverted commas as if to imply that when people speak about loving others in this way, they cannot truly mean what they say.² Here, it is possible that Arendt is not registering her refusal to bring love into the sphere of the political, but is seeking to challenge our "classically Christian" ways of thinking about love; she does not so much remove love from the world as she calls for a complex philosophy of love that does justice to both its deeply personal nature and worldly significance.³

In reading "The Crisis in Education," Frattura interprets Arendt as framing education in terms of whether "we love the world enough to assume responsibility for it"; and whether "we love our children enough not to expel them from our world."⁴ Importantly, however, Arendt's framing of education responds to what she sees as an educational crisis, specifically that it has become "a political problem of the first magnitude."⁵ Acknowledging that education has always been political, Arendt emphasizes that the American context—"a mass society" committed to the "equalization" of immigrant citizens—makes the political role that much more problematic.⁶ In America, traditional education is now politically outdated, and yet the country's educational reforms risk "mak[ing] absolute the world of childhood."⁷ For Arendt, this risk is worrisome because the essence of education is to introduce children—"the newcomer and stranger"—to the existing world, as a way of preparing them to renew it.⁸ Such an introduction requires that schools "interpose between the private domain

of home and the world.”⁹ They must represent the world without becoming an actual part of the world, which in turn allows students to flourish as truly unique.

Frattura characterizes Arendt’s sense of love as apolitical in the sense that it is reserved for the private domain of the home and the school, and it only ever prepares us for the world; it is not itself part of the world. While it is clear that Arendt locates love in the private domain, I wish to raise some considerations that illuminate a deeper connection between love and politics in her thought.¹⁰ First, the love Arendt speaks of in “The Crisis in Education” is motivated by a deep commitment to the founding of a democratic social order. Secondly, the world that Arendt speaks of is not just political, although politics is an integral part. It is a common or communal world in which humans share opinions and act collectively. Why then would Arendt claim that love only happens when “a person is addressed directly, independent of their relation to the world”?¹¹ She emphasizes that if the world is an expression of our full humanity, then love (and hate) is the unique source of our individuation.¹² Love serves to protect the infinite plurality and differentiation of human beings—something that is always at risk in the common world. Thus, love ensures that communal bonds unite real individuals rather than abstract human subjects.

While Arendt sought to condemn racist ideology in all its manifestations, Frattura is correct that Arendt failed to appreciate it in the American context—Arendt herself admitted as much in a correspondence with Richard Ellison when she wrote that she had not comprehended “the element of stark violence of elementary, bodily fear in the situation.”¹³ Frattura provocatively and persuasively locates the source of Arendt’s blindness to her conception of love as apolitical or unpolitical. I wonder, however, if the source of Arendt’s blindness is in her failure to recognize structural racism and systemic oppression. In other words, she does not have the theoretical resources to make sense of how it is that the world experienced by Baldwin and other Black Americans is always and already “loveless.” The world of which Arendt speaks—a world that is common, public, and continuously remade—has been and continues to be white; the expulsion of Blacks is endemic to our white ways of speaking and living. Thus, to be born a Black person in the United States is to be born outside of the common world. Baldwin gives expression to this brutal fact when

he writes: “You were born into a society which spelled out with brutal clarity . . . that you were a worthless human being.”¹⁴

Baldwin concludes that “the really terrible thing” about racial desegregation is that it is the Black people who must “put pride in their pocket,” to refrain from hating the hater, and to achieve “a new roof for the schoolhouse, new books, a new chemistry lab, [and] more beds for the dormitories.”¹⁵ He argues that it is in the context of both racism and racial desegregation, that Black people loving Black people, is a profoundly political act. It is political in the sense that it both affirms the humanity and lovability of all Black individuals and reconstructs what is otherwise a white world. Arendt’s misunderstanding of Baldwin’s deep point is evidenced in her correspondence with him. She is frightened by his “gospel of love” because in her view it readily deteriorates into hypocrisy. She objects to it because “All the characteristics you stress in . . . [Black people]: their beauty, their capacity for joy, their warmth, and their humanity, are well-known characteristics of all oppressed people.”¹⁶ Here, it would seem that Arendt conceives of love as a noun, that is some *x* (person or people) qualifies as lovable if that *x* fulfills certain criteria (in this case, beauty, capacity for joy, warmth, and humanity). Thus, what makes Black people lovable does not make them uniquely lovable. Arendt says as much when she writes that these qualities “grow out of suffering and they are the proudest possession of all pariahs.”¹⁷

Arendt’s thinking about her own Judaism as a political problem for her was influenced by the Zionist, Barnard Lazare.¹⁸ Lazare argued that Jews should not accept their “pariah status” and that the only way to rebel against it was by joining forces with other oppressed peoples.¹⁹ It was in the joining of forces with other oppressed peoples that would reflect a conscious awareness of their pariah status. To quote Richard J. Bernstein, “Arendt herself was a ‘conscious pariah’ in the tradition of Lazare. She too believed that one should join with others to fight for justice and freedom.”²⁰ This belief informs Arendt’s perception of Baldwin’s “gospel of love” as an acceptance of the Black’s pariah status. Thus, she cautioned Baldwin that the lovable qualities of Black people that he is intent on praising are the qualities of all oppressed peoples and that these qualities do not survive “the hour of liberation.” The only way to ensure their survival is for Black people to champion all oppressed people.²¹ Even so, I agree with Frattura

that Arendt misses the point of Baldwin's "gospel of love."

For Baldwin, love is not a noun, but a verb. In his own words, "it involves daring and growth."²² It is in the choice of Black people to love other Black people that their beauty, their capacity for joy, their warmth, and their humanity are revealed.²³ Arendt does not understand that Baldwin's "gospel of love" is a speech act: he seeks to create the world by speaking it. He is saying "I do" to his people, making their common world lovable by celebrating the loveliness of Black culture and individuals. Thus, he writes that love "shall force our brothers to see themselves as they are, to cease fleeing from reality and begin to change it."²⁴ Arendt's failure to appreciate the strategy involved in Baldwin's "move" in the language game is due to her inability to perceive racism itself as a form of expulsion, and not just political persecution.

Unsurprisingly, for Baldwin, Black people loving Black people is a necessary but not sufficient condition for justice. White folks too must learn to "accept and love themselves and each other."²⁵ But if white people are to love themselves and each other, they must be prepared to loosen their grip on what is truly our common world and to let uniqueness in.

1 Addyson Frattura, "Two Loves Diverge: Education and A Love that Does Not Expel," *Philosophy of Education* 78, no. 2 (same issue).

2 *Love and Saint Augustine* (1929/1996) was Arendt's dissertation (of pre-Holocaust origin), in which she presented an analysis of Augustine's conception of love. We know that Arendt was revising the dissertation while working on the essays collected in *Between Past and Future* (Arendt 1929/1996, x); that she herself was preoccupied with the question of *caritas* or neighborly love; and that she had an enduring appreciation for the complexity of love. For discussions of the continuity of Arendt's thought on love, see the interpretive essay by Joanna Vecchiarelli Scott and Judith Chelius Stark in *Love and Saint Augustine*; Shin Chiba's 1995 article, "Hannah Arendt on Love and the Political: Love, Friendship and Citizenship," *The Review of Politics*, 57, no. 3 (1995): 505-535; specifically, 506-508.

3 Joanna Vecchiarelli Scott and Judith Chelius Stark, "Heidegger: Arendt Between Past and Future," in *Love and Saint Augustine, Hannah Arendt* (Chicago:

Chicago University Press, 1996), 191.

4 Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future: Six Exercises in Political Thought* (Cleveland: World Publishing Co., 1969), 196.

5 Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 173.

6 Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 179-180.

7 Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 184.

8 Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 188.

9 Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 188-189.

10 Here, I agree with Shin Chiba who argues that although “[o]ne cannot over-emphasize Arendt’s political aversion to the notion of love. [...] “she showed a sustained interest in the relationship between love and the political throughout her life.” Chiba, “Hannah Arendt on Love and the Political,” 507.

11 Hannah Arendt, interview by Günter Gaus, *Zur Person*, 1964, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=370EATBtPHs>.

12 Arendt writes in her letter to Baldwin, “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.” Hannah Arendt, “A Letter by Hannah Arendt to James Baldwin,” November 21, 1962, *Journal for Political Thinking* (2006): <http://www.hannaharendt.net/index.php/han/article/view/95/156>.

13 Arendt quoted in Elisabeth Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt, for Love of the World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), 316. For more nuanced critiques of Arendt’s failure to appreciate the full force of racism in the United States not mentioned by Frattura, see Danielle S. Allen, *Talking to Strangers* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2004); Richard J. Bernstein, *Why Read Hannah Arendt Now?* (Cambridge, Polity Press, 2018).

14 Baldwin claims that even God, which is all that was left to Black people, is white. James Baldwin, “My Dungeon Shook: Letter to My Nephew on the One Hundredth Anniversary of the Emancipation” in *Baldwin Collected Essays* (The Library of America: New York, 1998), 293.

15 James Baldwin, “Letter from a Region in My Mind,” *The New Yorker*, November 9, 1962, 40.

16 Arendt, “A Letter by Hannah Arendt to James Baldwin.”

17 Arendt, “A Letter by Hannah Arendt to James Baldwin.”

18 She wrote: “[B]elonging to Judaism had become my own problem, and my own problem was political. Purely political! I wanted to go into practical work, exclusively and only Jewish work. With this in mind I then looked for work in France.” Hannah Arendt, *Essays in Understanding*, ed. Jerome Kohn, 1st ed. (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co, 1994), 12.

19 Hannah Arendt, *The Jewish Writings*, ed. Jerome John and Ron H. Feldman (New York: Schocken Books, 2007), 283.

20 Bernstein, *Why Read Hannah Arendt Now?*, 37.

21 It was this view that inspired Arendt to be critical of the Zionist Jews who overlooked the plight of the Arabic Palestinians.

22 Baldwin, “Letter from a Region in My Mind,” 38.

23 For a discussion of love as a verb rather than a noun, see bell hooks, *All About Love* (New York: William Morrow Paperbacks, 2001).

24 Baldwin, “Letter to My Nephew,” 294.

25 Baldwin, “Letter from a Region in My Mind,” 5.