

The Critical Theory of Love: Reconceptualizing Love for Social Justice



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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 Durryle 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.

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operates, then reimagine it to help us grow.

Reimagining and reconceptualizing love must be a top priority if we are to meet the demands of social justice movements in the 21st century. For love to be transformative, it must be understood from the perspective of the most marginalized and the socially oppressed, and must engage directly with our individual and social contexts.

In *The Fire Next Time*, James Baldwin writes, “Love takes off the masks that we fear we cannot live without and know we cannot live within. I use the word ‘love’ here not merely in the personal sense but as a state of being, or a state of grace—not in the infantile American sense of being made happy but in the tough and universal sense of quest and daring and growth.”¹ In this way, all critical notions of love require us to pull back the curtains and examine what we believe love is and how it

This kind of critical framework for love is devoted to the ways of being and doing that support the mutual co-construction and repair of our full personhood, and materially resource our individual and collective freedom and transformation.

The Critical Theory of Love Framework

I created the Critical Theory of Love (CToL)² framework as a tool to help move us toward unapologetic wholeness and completeness, closer to realizing Dr. King's notion of a "love that does justice."³ Transformed systems, grounded in this six-part framework, will not only promote the dignity of love but also hold accountable any forces that undermine this pillar of life.

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1. **Affirming Social and Cultural Identities and Full Personhood**

The first (and most important) competency in the disciplined pursuit of love in our social justice work is affirmation: understanding the truth of our existence from the places of our social and cultural identities.⁴ Affirmation is also a process and practice. When we understand love as a process and a practice of affirmation, it invites us to consider each individual's inherent value and dignity. It encourages us to recognize and nurture the power within ourselves and others, acknowledging our experiences as meaningful. Affirmation, in this context, becomes transformative because it seeks to understand our social and cultural context and actively work to heal the wounds to our humanity caused by ongoing oppression and violence.

2. **Providing Historical and Contemporary Context**

Love does not happen outside the social and political contexts that shape us. Deepening our understanding of the historical and contemporary social dynamics that influence our social identities and material realities is critical for love to be culturally responsive. And through this understanding, we trace the lineage of healing and resistance that our ancestors used to survive, to love well, and to make joy in the most inhospitable circumstances.

3. **Understanding Power and Systemic Oppression**

The CToL is, in many ways, a quest to explore and understand power—both power *over others*, which oppression uses to harm us, and the power *within ourselves* that needs to be continuously cultivated. Understanding power in this way allows us to accurately discern the barriers it creates for people's dignity and material conditions. Without owning, reclaiming, and cultivating power within us and our communities, we will not be positioned to drive meaningful social change or have the capacity to maintain progress.

4. **Co-creating Rehumanizing Practices That Heal and Restore**

For love to be truly transformative, it must help us rehumanize ourselves, each other, and our communities. Dehumanization is central to oppression both as a process and as an outcome, so we must be equipped with tools, approaches, methods, and practices that heal and repair the mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual harm caused by systemic oppression. Transformative love strives to build power to change any system that ignores and silences the experiences, emotions, and perspectives of the historically and socially marginalized.

5. **Teaching Embodied Knowledge and Educating for Wholeness**

Liberation cannot be achieved until we learn to love our literal bodies. We are taught and socialized to believe that our bodies do not matter, unless they are performing in service of Whiteness, White supremacy, heteronormative patriarchy, and other oppressive systems.⁵ But when we are harmed by oppression, it is our literal bodies that are threatened, terrorized, starved, poisoned, and even killed. Within the CToL framework, love recognizes that our bodies are alive; they hold trauma,⁶ possibilities, and ancestral wisdom.⁷ When we choose to heal, our bodies become sacred sites of resistance—both individual and collective—against oppressive structures.⁸ We heal so that we can make choices that are not rooted in scarcity, trauma, or generational curses but in the boundless striving for peace and the possibilities of our wholeness.

6. **Measuring the Effectiveness of Our Practices**

Measuring love becomes essential for differentiating a critical theory of love from the normative everyday notion of love that operates as an instrument of oppression. Without measurement, there can be no accountability to the standard that

all life is precious. We must evaluate how effectively our methods produce healing and transformation within ourselves and the communities. At the structural level, without measures and mechanisms to understand how our policies, practices, approaches, and strategies are impacting people's material reality, then love will continue to operate as an instrument of oppression.

While there are many scientific ways to measure love and identify patterns of domination and exploitation, I believe there is also a way to do it on an interpersonal level. CToL invites you to ask anyone after leaving your presence if they feel more capable, grounded in who they are, nourished to live and fight another day, or well-positioned to find joy in a world that seeks to crush their soul. We can ask what specific behaviors allowed them to feel that way, what conditions nourished their mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual growth while they were with us. We can invite in conversation about what structures were reordered to ensure our individual, institutional, and broader social wellbeing; learn from them; and shift in ways we can. CToL invites us to be in a continual state of curiosity and dialogue to meet the ever-shifting sociopolitical contexts of our lives.

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A Transformative Force

If we tirelessly adopt and embody these competencies in our lives and work, we can move closer to a world where love has the power to transform not only individuals but also systems. I believe that by practicing and building our competencies based on this framework, love will indeed become a transformative force to be reckoned with.

Notes:

1. James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* (Vintage International, 1993), 95. Originally published in 1963 by Dial Press.
2. Durryle N. Brooks, "(Re)Conceptualizing Love: Moving Towards a Critical Theory of Love in Education for Social Justice," *Journal of Critical Thought and Praxis*, 6, no. 3 (2017).
3. Martin Luther King, Jr. *Strength to Love* (Harper & Row, 1963).
4. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Harper & Row, 1962). Originally published in 1927 in German.
5. Dorothy Roberts, *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty* (Pantheon, 1997).
6. Joy DeGruy, *Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome: America's Legacy of Enduring Injury and Healing* (Uptone, 2005).
7. Mark Wolynn, *It Didn't Start with You: How Inherited Family Trauma Shapes Who We Are and How to End the Cycle* (Viking, 2016).
8. Bessel A. van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma* (Viking, 2014).

About the author



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